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WALT COBURN'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

THE COWBOY AUTHOR'S RIP-ROARING RANGE-WAR SAGA

LOAD YOUR GUNS—DIG YOUR GRAVES!

A WALT COBURN NOVEL

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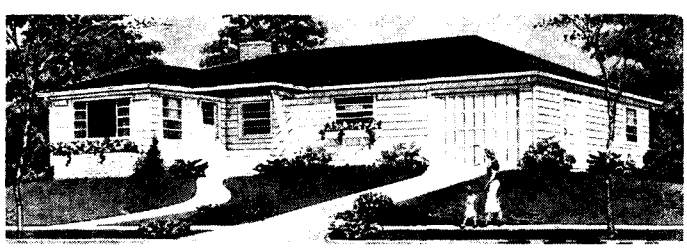

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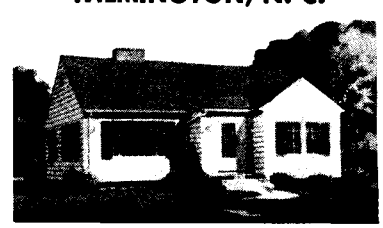

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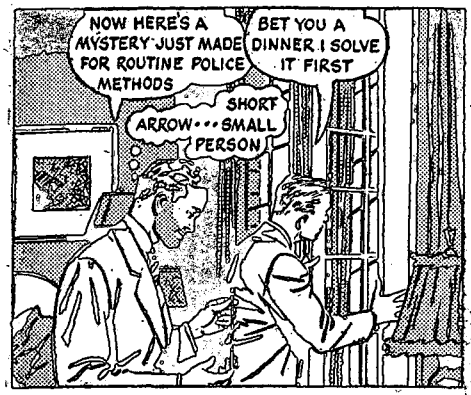
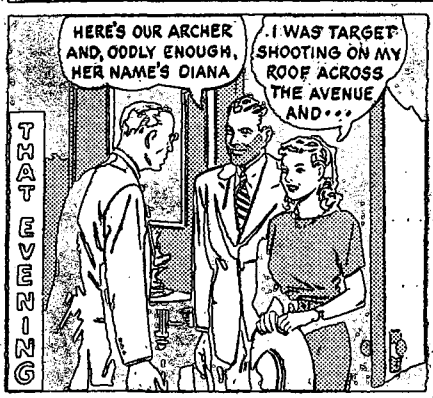
INSPECTOR MOON WON HIS BET AND THEN...

IN A LOFTY NEW YORK APARTMENT, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JIM MOON AND A MYSTERY WRITER, H.H. KYNE, ARGUE OVER THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE LATTER'S NEWEST "WHO DONE IT" WHEN . . .



...AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES

THAT EVENING



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WALT COBURN'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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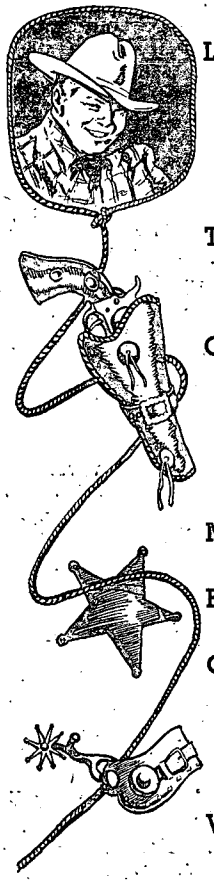
VOL. 2 APRIL, 1950 NO. 2



SMASHING COW-COUNTRY NOVEL

LOAD YOUR GUNS—DIG YOUR GRAVES! . . Walt Coburn 10

Flaming range war rocked Bear Paw Valley when old Seth Lawton set two war-necked outfits against each other, and then stood back and waited for Boothill to claim those fighting men—while he claimed the valley!

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TWO STIRRING FRONTIER NOVELETTES

THE DEVIL'S TRAIL DRIVE . . . . . Ray Nafziger 50

Over the grave of his best friend, Red Toomey swore to take that poverty herd through—or leave his own bones to bleach in the merciless sun. . . .

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GOD HELP THAT GREENHORN CARAVAN! . . . . . Thomas Calvert McClary 72

In twin streams of cavalry and pioneer blood, that ill-fated wagon train wrote glorious history. . . .

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There's more than one way of skinning a cougar!

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HALF-PINT HERO . . . . . Dennison Rust 62

The toughest of 'em all was scared little Hardpan Sykes!

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ON ONE BLACK NIGHT . . . . . Foster-Harris 64

A hundred years of feudist hate drove that fighting pair to one nightmare minute of gunflame—and glory!

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SPECIAL WESTERN FEATURE

WALT'S TALLY BOOK . . . . . Walt Coburn 6

Never try to beat three of a kind—when they're named Dulin!

May Issue Published March 17th!

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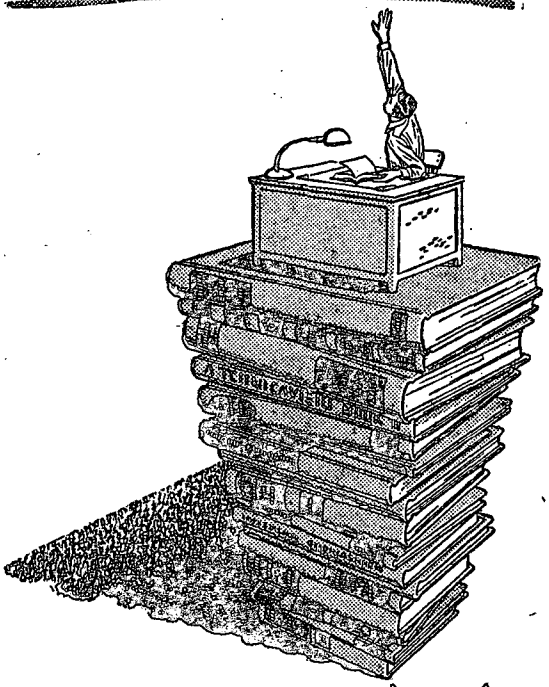

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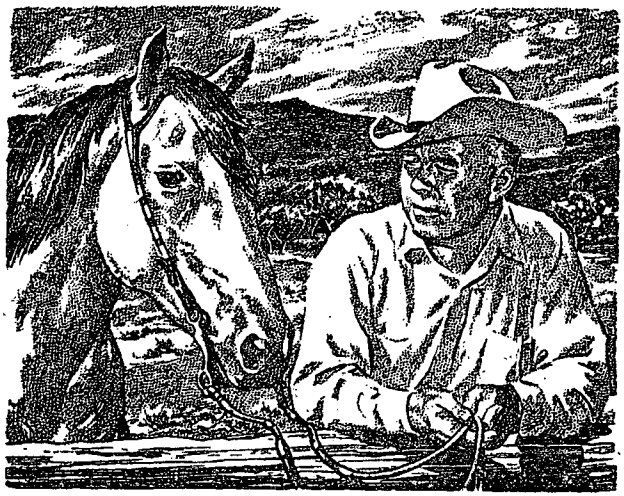

★ WALT'S TALLY BOOK

TAKE any one of the three brothers, and each one is deserving of his own separate story. Each of the Dulin boys was a gambler in his own right. But it was when the three brothers worked together as a team that their genius cropped out.

In order that you may know them each as separate individuals, each man with a different set of characteristics, each differing from the other in looks and build, I'd like to list them separately, so that you can study each man and get a picture of him in your mind.

Don't forget for even a split second that it was a hell of a dangerous game they played. The stakes were high in the big gambling houses in Montana, Colorado, Nevada, the Dakotas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California. Doubly dangerous when they crossed into Mexico to play the Border towns from Juarez to Tia Juana—Agua Preta, Cananea, Naco, Nogales and Mexicali. For the most part every gambler packed a belly gun hidden within reach of his deft gambler's fingers. Or below the Border, a hidden knife.

Sid Dulin was the oldest of the three. Some claim he was the best gambler. There was no doubt at all about his being the most dangerous.

Sid stood six feet without his high-heeled boots on. Good shoulders and slim bellied, and a good pair of legs. He had a smattering of prize ring science which made him a hard man to whip in a barroom fight. He was sandy haired, handsome, clean shaven, with an easy grin that seldom reached his cold shrewd eyes that puckered at the corners. He had the sense of humor that all the Dulin brothers had. Easy to get along with, was Sid, except when he was drinking. Whiskey was apt to make him mean and quarrelsome and treacherous. But Sid never drank when he was gambling for real money, because he knew that it was bad business. And first and last, the Dulin boys were businessmen.

They had their own saloons in Landusky and Zortman, two mining camps and cow towns in the Little Rockies. They owned a ranch where they ran cattle. Some of the horses they owned were

(Continued on page 91)

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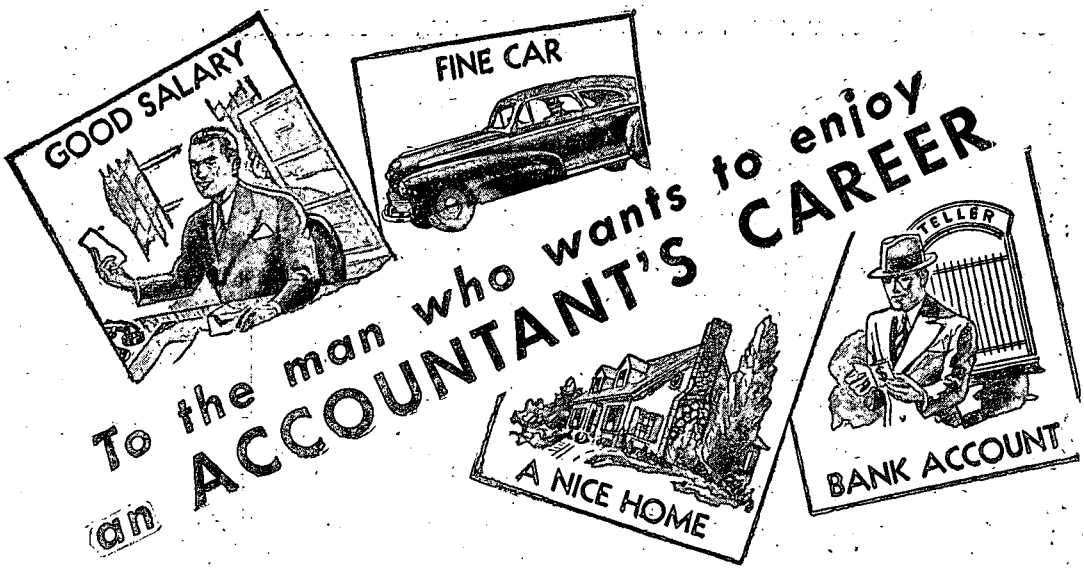

IF you're that man, here's something that will interest you.

Not a magic formula—not a get-rich-quick scheme—but something more substantial, more practical.

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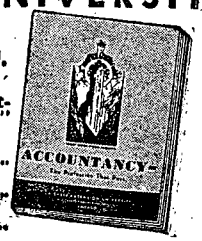

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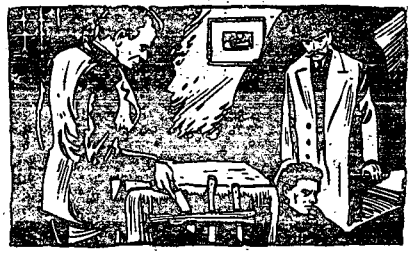

IN THE LAIR of the Black Hand Johnny is held captive and tortured because he knows too much!

Does Johnny escape from the clutches of the BLACK HAND? Can Johnny, alone, destroy the evil band of the BLACK HAND? See M-G-M's suspense-taut thriller...

Black Hand

starring

GENE KELLY

J. CARROLL NAISH · TERESA CELLI

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Directed by RICHARD THORPE
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*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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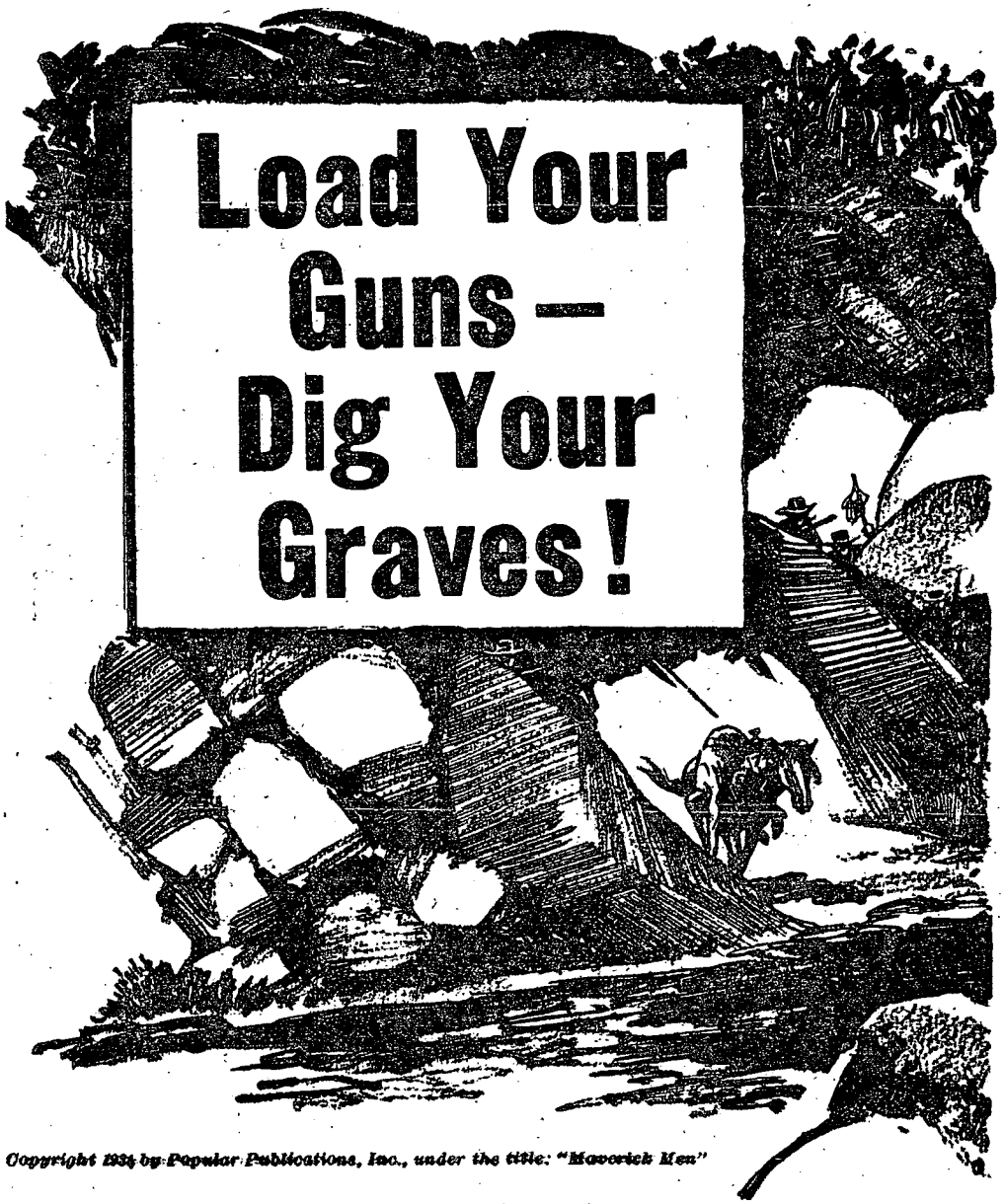

Load Your Guns — Dig Your Graves!

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By Walt Coburn

CHAPTER ONE

The Forty-Rod War

IT WAS whiskey talk that started the cattle war in Bear Paw Valley—for if Bill Patterson hadn't been more than half drunk he would never have told the customers in the Maverick Saloon that he aimed to run Jay Cross out of Montana.

That was fight talk, and there are always plenty of tongues to spread that sort of thing. It was up to Bill Patterson to back up his talk or be called a coward.

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In downtown saloons, ranch bunkhouses and distant line-camps the word was whispered: "Bill Patterson an' Jay Cross are goin' to shoot out their grudge. An' when they do—God help Bear Paw Valley!"

As Bill raised the white flag a big, black gelding broke out of the clearing, a bloodstained burden across its back. . . .

Smashing Range-War Saga

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Bill Patterson, like as not, regretted his bragging after he got back to his ranch and sobered up. He had a nice little outfit started there at the lower end of the valley. Prices had been good, and his beef had netted him plenty. He'd had a fair calf crop. It had been a good summer and he had put up all the hay he could use. Now if he got into gun trouble, it might cost him everything he had made. Or Jay Cross might even kill him, though Jay wasn't very fast with a gun—not anywhere near the shot that Bill was.

Anyhow the talk had been made and Bear Paw Valley began to wonder what would come of it. Bets were being made even before word of Bill Patterson's fight talk reached the J Cross ranch at the upper end of the valley. And by the time Jay got the news, ranchers in the valley were beginning to take sides.

Bill Patterson was a big man, hard muscled, with a square face and a wide mouth that grinned a lot. His eyes were gray and his hair black. He was one of the best bronc riders in the country, and while not exactly loud mouthed, Bill Patterson certainly didn't hide his light beneath any bushel. A bragger, some said—yet when he bragged, he had a habit of making good his boast.

Jay Cross, owner of the J Cross iron and a good-sized outfit, was the exact opposite of Patterson. Tall, rawboned, soft spoken, with hair the color of new rope and puckered blue eyes, his features were large and rough hewn. A natural born cowman, Jay, and to watch him rope was a treat.

Up until a year or more before, these two, Bill Patterson and Jay Cross, had been friendly enough. They'd made the big cowboy contests together—Calgary, Prescott, Chayenne, Pendleton. Each had made money at the contests. Then last year they had gone together to the Prescott Frontier Days, and returned separately. Back in town, when they met, they kept apart. That fall they did not exchange reps. They built a drift fence, separating the two ranges. Bill Patterson gathered J Cross cattle and shoved them over on their home range. Jay Cross did likewise with all the Lazy P stuff he gathered.

Neither of them had ever given the reason for this estrangement and Bear Paw Valley did not ask questions. Something in the attitude of the two men forbade it. But there were any number of stories and rumors that you could take or leave. Some said the trouble was over something that had happened at the Prescott Frontier Days contest. Another story was that Jay's foreman had written him saying that there was some queer branding going on over at the Lazy P ranch. The women of the valley said the two cowmen had fallen out over a girl. You could take your choice.

Jay took the news of Bill's threat with a quiet nod, and said nothing. But the J Cross cook, in town for grub a week or two later, told the bartender at the Maverick that Jay had started packing a gun.

A FEW drifting cowpunchers, strangers here in the valley, began to show up around town. They were hunting work. Which outfit, they wanted to know, paid the better wages, the Lazy P or the J Cross? Which outfit was the bigger of the two? And they asked guarded questions about this cattle war that was brewing. Then, one morning at daybreak, they saddled their horses, rode out of town and did not return.

Bear Paw had new food for talk. Those men were no common hands. They had all the earmarks of imported gunmen.

A feeling of uneasiness spread throughout the valley. The ranchers eyed one another with suspicion. Which side would this or that rancher be on?

Thus matters stood when the three Lawton boys and their uncle rode into

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town from their ranch on the other side of the valley. They owned the Box X outfit and ran cattle over into three counties. Once in a great while one of them would show up in Bear Paw.

Old Seth Lawton, grizzled, shabby, always in need of a shave and clean clothes, was worth more than a million, some claimed. But he never wore anything but an old flannel shirt, overalls, rusty boots and a battered hat. A leathery little old man was Seth, with bowed legs, and a pair of hard blue eyes set under shaggy white brows that met above his battered nose. His mustache was ragged, tobacco stained, its drooping ends chewed unevenly. He walked with a limp, and his left hand was knife scarred, shriveled shut.

There was a story that when he had brought his first big herd into Montana, he had left the real owner of the cattle back yonder in an unmarked grave along the Chisholm Trail.

The story was never proved. Nobody had ever claimed the cattle that were branded with Seth Lawton's Box X iron. But from that herd he had built up his outfit. He had never gone back down the trail. Probably, if that story concerning him contained much truth, Seth had ample reason for never returning to the Southwest cattle country.

Then his three nephews had showed up. They were unlike in some ways, identical in other ways. They, too, had come up the trail, three boys just at the end of their teens. Now they were grown men.

Lon was the oldest, tall, black haired, black eyed, hawk beaked, with a long white scar across his jaw. His mouth was as thin lipped as that of his uncle.

Macy Lawton was only a couple of inches over five feet tall. His hair was sand colored, thin, his features sharp, his pale eyes crafty. Quick as a cat and afraid of no man, dangerous as a sidewinder.

Duke, the youngest of the three, was a well-built young cowboy of medium height. Unlike the others, he liked to dress up. He wore fancy boots and shirts and pants with buckskin seats. His hats were the best Stetsons made. He was better natured than the others and would ride forty miles to a dance. He lacked the cow savvy of his brothers and uncle. He preferred town lights and a poker game or the squeak of a dance-hall fiddle.

In spite of his laughing hazel eyes, his ready grin, his happy-go-lucky ways and his peacock garb, he was said to be the most dangerous of the Lawton tribe in a rough-and-tumble fight or with that white-handled gun he carried in a fancy holster.

Women liked his polite manners and his flattering speeches. Some men hated him, but for the most part Duke Lawton was popular.

IN THE Maverick, the Lawtons ordered whiskey, and Duke called up everybody in the house to drink. Macy scowled up at him. Old Seth grunted and asked for a bigger glass. He filled it and drank alone, then walked toward the hallway that led to the private card rooms. He entered one of the rooms and closed the door behind him.

Lon and Macy followed him after a minute or two, their spurs jingling, guns low on their overalled thighs.

The more congenial Duke stayed at the bar, telling stories, joshing, buying drinks, a percentage girl on either side of him.

In the back room, Seth Lawton and the other two nephews talked in low tones to a cowboy who might have been recognized as one of those strangers who had come into the valley not so many weeks ago. The man had entered the room by a window that Seth had opened.

Half an hour later Seth Lawton, Lon and Macy came back into the saloon. They had a drink, then left town. And no man or woman in Bear Paw knew the reason for their brief visit.

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The proprietor of the Maverick puzzled a little over the fact that the back room window screen had been cut away and a man's bootprints showed in the dirt outside. Somebody had entered and departed through that window.

Bear Paw boasted no newspaper, but all the range news and town gossip was on tap at the Maverick. And in the telling of such news, nothing of the story was lost in its repetition.

The big, genial proprietor loved his business. He was a large, florid, paunchy man with thick hands, jowls and a pair of twinkling eyes. He wore a toupé that lacked several shades of matching his real hair. His curled mustache was dyed yet another color. His red tie sported a diamond horseshoe stickpin.

He liked the talk, the drinks, the fights —all of it. Especially the conversations across the bar. He spoke with a German accent and was known in the valley and beyond as Dutch Louie. He also owned the restaurant next door, and it was said of him that he had never refused a broke man a meal or a few drinks if he needed them. He was a man without an enemy. Yet he was to play his part in the war that was brewing.

THE LAWTONS left Bear Paw Valley without visiting either the Lazy P or the J Cross ranches. But both Bill Patterson and Jay Cross got word that old Seth and his nephews had been in the valley.

"And for no good, bet on that," Jay Cross said when he got the news. "They're snakes."

Bill Patterson grinned when one of his cowboys told him that the Lawtons had passed by without stopping.

"Just as well they didn't. They belong up there in the mountains and yonder side of the mountains." Then he added, "It ain't like that outfit to make a ride just for exercise. They got some kind o' dirty, sidewinding game to play."

But neither Bill Patterson nor Jay Cross had time right now to bother about the Lawtons. They were preparing for the fall roundup. There was plenty to do: Mess wagon and bed wagon to get ready. Harness to mend and oil. The remuda fetched in and strings of horses allotted to the cowboys. For the time being the war talk all but died down.

Then a rancher named Jake Burns, whose place was not far from the J Cross home ranch, was arrested, accused of butchering a Lazy P steer. The man had a wife and three youngsters and a good reputation. Jay Cross rode into Bear Paw and made arrangements with Dutch Louie to go the man's bail.

"It's a frameup of some kind, Louie. Jake Burns is honest. I'm backin' him."

"Yah, Jay. I fix bail mit the county attorney. Mit der roundup on your hands you got vorries enough. I fix it, Jay." He pronounced it "Yay."

Bear Paw had no court. Only a constable and a Justice of the Peace, whose authority was limited to minor offences. So Dutch Louie's check was posted as bail, there at the county seat. Bill Patterson's attorney, representing the Lazy P, did not fail to note the presence of the rotund Dutch Louie there in the court room.

"I'm acting for my friend, Jay Cross, who iss too busy mit roundups to come personal."

Jake Burns was released, pending his trial. Before he left town, however, he found one of the Lazy P cowboys who had testified that he and another cowboy had watched the butchering through field glasses.

"I butchered a beef, mister," Burns told the cowboy, "but it wore my brand. Somebody switched hides durin' the night, hanging a green Lazy P hide on my corral along where I had the meat hung. I'm warnin' you both that if ever I sight you

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on my land I'll run yuh off like I'd run a pair of coyotes. You kin tell Bill Patterson, when you go back, that what I said goes for every Lazy P man, including himself."

SO MORE fuel was added to the smoldering fire. Word was carried back to the Lazy P ranch by the two cowboys. Bill Patterson grinned unpleasantly.

"I'll send him to the pen where he belongs, unless somethin' happens to him meanwhile."

"Dutch Louie went his bail. Said he was actin' for Jay Cross, his good friend."

That brought a flush of anger to Bill Patterson's blunt featured face.

"That big sauerkraut eater," he growled, "had better keep his damned nose out of my business or he'll wish he'd never set foot in Bear Paw Valley. He talks too much. It ain't healthy."

Because range gossip spreads like a prairie fire, it reached the ears of Dutch Louie. Never, in all the years he had run a saloon and restaurant there at Bear Paw, had he ever been so threatened. It was as if Bill Patterson had hit him in the face. It worried him so that he could not enjoy his supper and his beer tasted flat in his mouth. He wanted no part in any war. He had just done a favor for Jay Cross. He would have done a like favor for Bill Patterson or any man he knew. Dutch Louie lost sleep over it. Even the bits of news he heard across the bar lacked flavor. It was hard to laugh and talk when a man who was a friend to all mankind is talked about that way.

Nervously he paced the floor behind the bar and polished already spotless glasses until sunrise. Save for the snoring swamper in a far corner, the saloon had been empty since one of two in the morning. He polished his beloved stickpin, which he had bought years before back in his little saloon in Milwaukee, from a down-at-the-heels race track man who had

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never returned to reclaim it. Somehow, the diamonds, for they were real diamonds, seemed to have lost their beautiful luster. For the first time in his memory Dutch Louie had made an enemy.

He looked ill as he turned the saloon over to the swamper in the morning and went into the restaurant to cook himself German pancakes with jelly.

He was trying to eat there, at his private table in the rear, when a cowboy strode in.

"Where's the John Law around here?" he asked Dutch Louie.

"The constable?"

"He'll do. There's a cowboy bin killed there at the drift fence between the Lazy P and the J Cross ranch. One of the Lazy P men, I reckon. His horse wore that iron. I didn't find anybody at the Lazy P but the cook and barn man and a ranch hand or two. Everybody's out on the roundup. So I came on to town."

Dutch Louie left his unfinished breakfast. Outside, he pointed out the constable's house, down the street. The cowboy swung himself into the saddle and rode down the street. Dutch Louie noticed that the sweat-marked, leg-weary horse wore Seth Lawton's Box X brand.

Back in the saloon, Dutch Louie poured himself two drinks of kümmel. A Lazy P man dead! What next?

CHAPTER TWO

Gathering War Clouds

BILL PATTERSON had to leave his roundup to one of his top hands and go to town to identify the dead man.

Yes, he recognized him. He had hired him a while back when the man asked for a job. He was on the books as Ed Brown. That was all he knew about him. He had sent Brown and another man out to hunt some horses the nighthawk had spilled the night before.

The man who had ridden with Brown testified that they had split up right after they left camp just about daybreak. He had located the horses a few hours later and fetched them to camp. The last he had seen of Ed Brown was when they had split up.

The dead man, it seemed, had put up a fight. There were three empty shells in his six-shooter. He had been shot, not once, but three times. The coroner testified that any of the three wounds might have proved fatal. The sign at the scene of the killing showed that the killer had been on the J Cross side of the gateless drift fence.

"The sheriff's office will make a thorough examination," said the district attorney. "Rest assured of that, Mr. Patterson. Have you any suspicion who might have done the killing?"

Bill Patterson's lips tightened and his eyes narrowed a little. He got to his feet without saying a word leaving the D. A. sitting at his desk, a confused, half-angry look on his face.

Bill Patterson rode back to his roundup camp and told his men about it.

"Havin' Jay Cross arrested, Bill?" asked one of the cowboys who, with Brown and two other men, had come into the valley a few months ago and hired out to the Lazy P.

"No. Even if there was evidence enough to hang him, I wouldn't go to the law with it. When you and Brown and a couple more boys hired out to me you said you could earn fightin' wages. I reckon that about covers the question."

The man nodded. "It shore does, mister. Ed Brown was a good friend of mine. I'd like to meet the gent that killed him. Think it was Jay Cross?"

"No. Jay Cross was at his roundup camp when the killin' was done."

"Plumb sure of that?" asked Seth Lawton's Box X rep who had found Brown's body.

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"That's what his men claim. Why?"

"When I testified at that coroner's inquest, I didn't tell all I knowed. See this spur with the busted strap? I found it there along the fence. There's a J Cross brand on the concho and on the silver mounting on the spur."

Bill Patterson examined the spur and its broken strap. He had seen that spur many times. It belonged to Jay Cross.

"You found it there along the fence? Which side?"

"The J Cross side. Where we found sign showin' that a man had been there in the brush waitin' long enough to smoke half a dozen cigarettes."

"Why did you hide out this spur?"

"It would take more than the spur to make a law case against Jay Cross. But I reckon it's enough proof for Bill Patterson, ain't that right?"

"I'll keep the spur," Bill Patterson said, and walked with it in his hand to the mess tent where he kept his bedroll.

THE THREE MEN who, with the dead Ed Brown, had hired out to him as tough hands, wanted action. They all said so. They declared that they were more than willing to start war with the J Cross outfit. But right now, Bill knew, was no time to start fighting. For the next month or two there was work to be done. Beef to gather and ship, hay to put up, sheds to repair, poor stuff to gather and drift to the winter range.

He put the spur and its broken strap in his canvas warsack, tied the sack and put it back in his tarp-covered bed, which he rolled up again and tied with its bed rope. Then he walked over to the bed tent where the cowboys were listening to the Box X rep retell his story. The dead man's partners added a word here and there, lauding the character and bravery of the dead man. The Lazy P men were impressed. Every man of them packed a gun.

"I got a few words to say, boys," said Bill Patterson, rolling a cigarette. "When the sign is right," he said, weighing his words, "I'll tell you what to do. But until I give you orders, keep out of trouble. We got work to do and plenty of it."

"What about Ed Brown?" asked one of the dead man's partners. "Ed got killed fightin' for the outfit. You ain't forgettin' that, mister?"

"I ain't forgettin' that, cowboy. But you're sort of forgettin' that I'm ramroddin' this outfit and givin' the orders. When I need any advice from you or any other man I hire, I'll turn my outfit over to him and buy me a sheep hook. You're a stranger here in the valley. So are two three more of you gents. It's time you got wise to the fact that I own this outfit and I run it as I damn please. Whenever you or any man here can't take my orders, I'll fire him. You're paid to punch cows. You'll punch cows. Now is there any gent here that thinks he's too much of a top hand to take my orders?"

Bill Patterson's grin was wide, mirthless. He stood there in the doorway of the bed tent, his narrowed eyes watching every man. No man spoke.

"Well, how about it?" he challenged them. "Who wants his time?"

The cowboys looked at one another. Those of them who had worked several years for Bill grinned a little. This was the Bill Patterson they would fight for till hell froze over. They knew that if any man asked for his check, he would get a fight with it.

"Nobody wants it, then?" said Bill Patterson. "All right. Get this straight. I'll make a bunch quitter out of any man I ketch belly-achin' about anything. And I'm workin' you like you never worked before. Go ketch your night horses."

Bill Patterson walked back to the mess tent and poured himself a cup of coffee. He had declared himself plenty, and it might mean trouble. Those new men

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were tough hands. They hadn't liked it.

As he sipped his coffee he kept thinking of that spur with its broken strap. Something queer about it being found there at the scene of the killing. Something not on the level about it. Jay Cross was the last man in the world to lay in wait for a man and kill him.

Another thing bothered Bill Patterson. Why hadn't the district attorney made mention of the fact that the dead Ed Brown was one of the witnesses against Jake Burns on that beef-butchering charge? Brown had been killed within five miles of the Burns Ranch. That was a strong point. And the D. A. was not the man to overlook any point, weak or strong.

CHAPTER THREE

Left to Die

THE CONSTABLE of Bear Paw was little more than a figurehead, but he took his job with a seriousness that bordered on the comical. Bear Paw Valley had a habit of settling its own affairs without the aid of the law. Not that it was lawless, but until this dispute between Bill Patterson and Jay Cross, there had been but little trouble save for an occasional shooting scrape or rustling job. Therefore the valley had little need of a peace officer. It had been in a spirit of cow-country fun that they'd put into office as constable Doc Dunning, local veterinary and owner of the feed and livery barn. In his sixties, always with a half-smoked cigar in his mouth, always smelling of the stable, horse liniment and whiskey, Doc Dunning was a short, thick little man with watery eyes and a love for pinochle—a loved shared by Dutch Louie.

Because the roundup season was in full swing, the town was all but deserted. Dutch Louie and Doc, over their beer and pinochle, discussed the trouble that was threatening the peace of the entire valley. That shining, nickel-plated star of which he was so proud now seemed nothing less than a curse to the little horse doctor. Some cowboy with a sense of humor, perhaps it was Bill Patterson, had sent Doc a pearl-handled, intricately engraved six-shooter with a barrel seven and a half inches long. With the gun had come a letter of presentation signed simply, "Your friends in Bear Paw Valley."

It was an awkward weapon for the paunchy little Doc, but he had worn it with much pride these three or four years. He had never fired the gun. Doc disliked the recoil and would flinch when he pulled the trigger of even a .22. Now, however, he dreaded putting it on, and it was only when he took it off at night that he felt anywhere near at peace. His nights were filled with nightmares in which he was beset by gun fighters while he, paralyzed by fear, could not pull the beautiful pearl-handled six-shooter.

To Dutch Louie alone did he confide his fears. Dutch Louie had broken the ice when he whispered to Doc the warning sent him by Bill Patterson; and Doc, rheumy-eyed, his voice a husky whisper, would relate his terrible dreams and confide his fears. Their pinochle games lost flavor. They drank kümmel with their beer because its potency gave them courage.

So stood matters when the cowboy called Ed Brown was found dead. Doc had driven out there in his buckboard, behind his team of fat bay horses that had only one gait besides a walk. That gait was a lazy, dust-scuffling trot. Doc suffered the agonies of death on that trip to the drift fence where the killing had occurred. He told Dutch Louie upon his return that he feared every mile of the road that he would get a bullet in his back.

Nor did it add to his peace of mind to learn the J Cross outfit would be making their first shipment next week. That

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meant a town full of cowboys who took their fun in a boisterous manner. The Lazy P was shipping two days after the J Cross. If the two outfits tangled, there would be plenty of trouble.

"I got a mind to turn in my badge and gun, Louie," he groaned heavily.

"Turn 'em in to who, Doc? When a man takes office mit an oath to bind it solid, he iss stuck. *Jah.* Shuffle the cards while I bring more beer mit kümmel. We need it."

Duke Lawton's arrival broke up the game. The youngest of the Lawton tribe was alone. He was dressed as usual in his fancy clothes and walked with his usual swagger. He grinned at the gloomy-looking pinochle players.

"Where's the corpse?" he laughed.

Doc winced. He was a little hard of hearing and the word *corpse* frightened him.

"Another killing?" he blurted huskily.

Duke laughed and shook his head. "Not that I know of, Doc. But I just got down from the mountains and ain't had time to look around much. Trot out the bottle, Louie, and we'll lift a few. I want a bottle to take along. What's new?"

He stayed only half an hour. Before he left he purchased some rolls of bandage and adhesive tape and iodine at the store. Dutch Louie, after all the years spent behind the bar, had learned how to study men. And he read an uneasiness beneath Lawton's rough banter.

He wondered why Duke had bought medical supplies. Also he noticed that Duke's eyes were bloodshot and that he looked drawn and gaunt. He spoke of this to Doc.

Doc nodded dismally and reached for his kümmel. He had always feared and distrusted the Lawtons. He hated Duke for his barbed banter and rough humor.

"There was spots on his fancy pants, Louie. Might have been blood."

It was blood. The blood of a Box X cowboy who lay wounded in a cave up on the Lawton range, in the roughest part. Not more than a mile from the cave was a carefully hidden grave that held the body of a nameless man. The Lawtons never carried their troubles to the law. There in their badlands country they took care of their own fights.

In the cave under a rimrock ledge Duke cared for the wounded cowboy who had been shot through the thigh. He fed the man whiskey, squeezed blood and dirt from the ugly wound, then washed the raw wound with straight iodine. The man lay there, wet with cold sweat, gritting his teeth. Duke's methods were crude but not lacking in skill.

DUKE washed the blood from his hands and bare arms, then rolled two cigarettes. He lighted them both and shoved one between the wounded man's lips.

"We'll hit for the ranch about dusk," he told the man.

"Gawd, Duke, let me go on out of the country! They'll git me, sure as hell!"

"I reckon not, feller, if you keep your mouth shut. That jasper asked for it and you gave him what he wanted."

"But he didn't ask for trouble, no more than Ed Brown wanted it. Them two dead 'uns has friends, kinfolks that'll take 'er up where they left off. Let me lay here till this laig gits better, then stake me to a fast horse. I tell you, Duke, I got a belly full of this game."

Duke's grin stiffened into a twisted line. His eyes were cruel now, yellowish in the light of the setting sun.

"Have it your own way, feller. Nobody will locate you here at the cave. You don't need to go to the ranch." Duke handed the man the bottle of whiskey, then went out of the cave. A few minutes later he was riding along a dim trail that twisted through the badlands.

Back there in the cave under the rimrock the wounded man took a pull at his

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bottle. He heard Duke ride away, and suddenly he sat up, fear stamped in his bloodshot eyes. It had struck him, like a blow in the face, what Duke Lawton was doing. Duke was leaving him there in the cave, afoot, with only a bottle of whiskey and no food. His wounded leg would not bear his weight. It would tax the strength of a strong man to make it on foot to Bear Paw. Duke Lawton had left him here to die. Die like a wounded animal alone.

Sobbing, cursing, he dragged himself to the mouth of the cave, his six-shooter in his hand. But he was too late. Duke was lost to sight in the rough hills. The wounded man buried his bearded face in his arms, dry sobs shaking him. Then he crawled back to his bottle. Alone, death waiting to claim him, he sat with his back to the wall. He dreaded the thick blackness of the coming night when the wolves and coyotes would howl.

* * *

Jay Cross pawed through the contents of the jockey box on the mess wagon.

"What become of the spur I put in there?" he asked the cook.

"What spur, Jay?"

"I busted the strap on my spur about a week ago. I put it in the jockey box."

"Ain't seen it, as I recollect," grunted the old cook, busy with his batch of sourdough bread. "A man's likely to find anything in that ketch-all. Cowboys has got the idee that a mess wagon jockey box is a place to pack everything but what belongs there."

"And you just naturally cleaned out everything that wasn't yours. That it?"

"I clean 'er out now and then," the crotchety old cook defended his rights. "Dang right I do. But I don't recollect no spurs."

Jay made another futile search, then gave it up. It would be like the old cook to throw away the spur along with all manner of other stuff that was in his way. Roundup cooks are like kings in their palaces. They brook no interference, even from the man who pays them.

None of the cowboys remembered seeing the spur.

Loss of the spur annoyed Jay a lot. He'd had those spurs a long time. He would rather have lost a hundred dollars. He was almost tempted to fire the cook, but thought better of it. A first-class roundup cook is a mighty scarce specimen. Besides, he doubted if the cranky old rascal ever had cleaned out the jockey box on the wagon. That was just an excuse for the old son to belly-ache about something. Nope, no use firing him. There was too much work to do, and cowboys work better on good grub. The spur was gone. Where or how it had gotten out of the jockey box was a puzzle, for it didn't look as if any man would steal a spur that was etched with the J Cross brand.

Jay was not in any too good a humor as he saddled up the next morning before daybreak. For one thing, he was still irritated over the loss of the spur. And his temper wasn't helped any by the fact that he had to go on an unpleasant journey. The Box X rep had gotten into a tangle with a J Cross cowboy over something and there had been a fight. The Box X rep, temporarily laid up with a couple of broken ribs and a broken nose, had threaten to cut his string and go back to his ranch.

So Jay decided he would ride over to the Box X ranch and have it out, once and for all, with the Lawtons. There were far too many Box X cattle on the J Cross range. And Seth Lawton should, according to the unwritten law of the cattle country, get those cattle back on their own range. Seth should have at least two reps with the J Cross wagon to handle their cattle. That was what was taking Jay Cross over on the Box X range now. He left orders with his wagon boss to handle the

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outfit till he returned, then he rode into the gray dawn.

THE BOX X range was familiar to Jay. He had ridden it many a time when he had repped for the outfit. That was how it happened that he knew the short cut across the badlands. That short cut would save him ten or fifteen miles, where miles were mostly up and down.

He was following a twisting trail up close to the rimrock when his horse shied suddenly. Instinctively, Jay reached for his gun. It might be a bear or a mountain lion. He urged his horse forward, cautiously. A turn in the trail and he pulled up short.

There, face twisted with pain, his hand gripping a six-shooter, a man was dragging himself across the rocks and brush, leaving a bloody trail behind him. He was hatless and his eyes were staring, bloodshot, glittering. He muttered something thickly and cocked the gun in his hand.

Jay quit his horse with a leap that landed him on top of the man, whose gun roared. The bullet missed Jay's head by a matter of a few inches. Jay knocked the gun from his hand and pinned him down.

"Damn you, Duke!" snarled the man, his voice almost incoherent. "Leave a man die like a wolf in a trap! I'll kill you, by God, I will, Lawton. You can't get away—"

His voice choked in his throat and the feverish eyes closed. Jay relaxed his grip on the wounded man. . . .

* * *

It was dawn of a new day when Jay Cross rode into Bear Paw, holding a delirious, wounded man in his saddle. He pulled up at the constable's house next to the livery barn.

"Got a man that needs attention, Doc,"

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and ... Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."

Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp

HE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you. Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff ... keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair ... and it's economical, too!

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he told the little constable who appeared in nightshirt and hat, in the doorway. "Got an extra bed or a cot?"

"Straight back. I'll light a lamp, Jay. Is he dead?"

"No, but he will be unless we take care of him. I want some hot water and bandages and whatever you have along that line. And get this fixed hard in your mind, Doc. Nobody is to know he's here. See about getting a doctor from the county seat—and the sheriff. This man is under arrest for murder, but nobody is to know about it. Tell Dutch Louie to come over. But don't spill one word to anyone else. This is plumb important."

Still in his flannel nightshirt, still wearing his battered old hat that smelled of liniment and stable, the constable made a fire and put on the tea kettle. Muttering under his breath, his hands unsteady, he started for the front door.

"Better pull on your pants and boots, Doc," called Jay, smiling faintly.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lawton Clan

IN THE old log house at the Box X ranch, Seth Lawton faced his three nephews. His puckered blue eyes blazed with anger and he shook his maimed fist at them as they sat around in the big old front room. It was a cold night and the big stove was cherry red. There was a littered desk, battered chairs of stuffed horsehair, log walls whitewashed, decorated by calendars. There was a big, well-filled gun rack over in one corner. It was raining and the boots of the Lawtons had left muddy tracks on the floor and Navajo rugs. Wet slickers, chaps and hats were lying on the floor near the door.

"You claim you left him there at the cave?" Seth Lawton snapped at Duke.

"With a bottle of whiskey and a bullet hole in his leg. He'll be dead in another twenty-four hours. I tell you, he's as yellow as a coyote's belly."

"Why didn't you finish him?" Seth's voice was brittle.

"I figured," said Duke, smiling thinly, "that I'd let nature take its course."

"Supposin' somebody finds him?" growled Lon.

"Nobody will find him there."

"Looks to me," put in the undersized Macy, his voice harsh, "that you was too anxious to get over to that Injun camp and give them squaws an eyeful of your beauty. Leavin' that gent at the cave was plumb loco. No tellin' what'll come of it. He's got to be killed if he's turnin' quitter. If you ain't man enough to finish the job, why did you tackle it? You git paid enough for what you do."

"Swap them fancy duds for a pair of overalls," said Lon, pouring himself a drink, "and make a hand, just for once. He's got to be killed before he talks. Looks like Macy's job."

Macy Lawton twisted quickly in his chair. "My job, you big ox? What the hell's to keep you from finishin' what Duke didn't have the guts to do? It's time you took a stack of chips."

"Quit janglin', the three of yuh," snapped old Seth Lawton. "I'm tired listenin' to your chin music. Duke, go back and finish your job."

"Can't make 'er tonight in this storm. No horse could foller the trail. I'll tackle it, come daylight."

"See that you do. Macy, you take a string of horses and light out for the J Cross roundup. Rep with 'em till you hear from me. Lon, you take your horses and hightail it for the Lazy P wagon. Both of you keep your eyes open and your mouths shut. Duke will tend to his job, then drift into Bear Paw and play it from that end. I'll handle this part of it. You all know what to do when the time comes. I'm after Bear Paw Valley, and I'll git it or die a-tryin'. And damn your worth-

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less hides, if you don't do your parts, I'll cut you all off without a dollar. Hear that?"

This was old Seth Lawton of the Box X talking now, in his rasping voice that cut like a jagged blade. No matter how tough Lon and Macy and Duke might be, old Seth was still the boss, and they'd take his orders as long as he lived.

"I got 'er made out, hear me, all three of you? Let one of you double-cross me and you'll hang for it. If I'm killed by any of you, the one that does the job will hang—because you'll be proved guilty, hear that? You all hate me. Each one of you hates the others. You're whelps of the Lawton breed, all of you.

"Your father was my brother. His name wasn't Lawton. Neither is mine. Neither is yours. I shot and killed your father because of a woman down in Mexico. I promised him when he died that I'd look after his brats. My money kept you from starvin'. You're all beholdin' to me for everything you got today. And you'll take my orders or I'll live to see you all hang. Git out. I'm a-goin' to bed."

Seth Lawton's three nephews looked at each other in silence. The old man drank from the bottle, his puckered eyes watching them. Duke was the first to quit his chair by the stove. He managed a grin, but his eyes, when they looked at old Seth, were yellow as the eyes of a cougar.

"Sweet dreams, Uncle Seth," he said. Then he hitched his gunbelt and walked to the door.

MACY stood up. He twisted a cigarette into shape and lit it. Then he helped himself to a drink from the bottle.

"I'll head for the J Cross wagon in the mornin'," he said simply, but there was a sinister something behind his few words. He followed Duke outside, leaving the door open behind him. The wind whipped the sleet and rain into the room.

Lon swung his lanky frame out of his chair. His thin-lipped mouth twitched at one corner.

"You want Bear Paw Valley almighty bad," he said, ignoring the gusts of rain and sleet that stung his back as he stood in the open doorway. "Well, I'll help you git it. You've talked a lot tonight. You put things almight plain, anyhow. You was right when you said us boys hated one another. And you know that we don't waste any love on you. You've raised us to be tough. We can't none of us change our ways.

"We're out now to grab Bear Paw Valley from Jay Cross and Bill Patterson. You want that valley for summer range. You had Duke rib that split up between Jay Cross and Bill Patterson, there at the Prescott Frontier Days contest. Duke, the dude, with his fancy duds and his way with women. You didn't think I knowed, but I do. And I hate Duke all the more for what he done. Just like I hate you."

He waved his hand warningly at the old man by the glowing stove.

"Sit still and listen. I'm talkin' now and nothin' but a bullet kin stop me. You and Duke wasn't satisfied to pick on men. You had to jump on a woman. A girl that never done you any harm in her life. She never harmed anybody. She's too decent for that. She cared a lot for Jay Cross and likewise for Bill Patterson. She and her old gent had a string of relay ponies and they made the same rodeos with Jay and Bill. She did trick ropin' and ridin' and the three of 'em, along with her dad, sort of went around together to the evenin' carnivals and shows and so on. Jay Cross and Bill Patterson was neighbors in Bear Paw Valley. They had the whole valley, you might say. Best summer range a man could find in Montana. You wanted that range. You figured that if you could get Jay and Bill fightin' serious, they'd kill off one another and you could buy out both outfits. So you sends

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purty Duke off to foller the rodoes. Duke ain't much of a rodeo contestant but he makes a flashy showin'. And he savvies how to fool women. He fooled that girl, all right, because she was too decent to see through him."

Macy paused, his thin lips wrinkling in a snarl.

"I don't know how Duke pulled the trick," he said a little thickly. "You hired him to do it and he did. And he's never told anybody how. But there at the Prescott show he somehow ribbed it so that it looked to Bill Patterson like her and Jay Cross had made a monkey out of him. Bill like to killed Jay that night in a hotel room. Duke had played his slick game on all of 'em. Jay Cross and Bill Patterson is enemies. The girl and her father, before they quit the rodeo game, told both Jay and Bill that they wouldn't be ketched on the same range with either of 'em. Her old man, a fine old feller, was goin' to kill Jay and Bill both, but his daughter kep' him from it. The old man died a few months ago. The girl runs their little spread in Arizona. She still thinks that Jay Cross and Bill Patterson are snakes. She don't know that Duke Lawton is the snake.

"That's what started the trouble there in the valley. And you're hirin' us to keep that trouble boilin'. You've made damn crooks of all three of us. You'd dance a jig on our graves. But each of us wants the Box X outfit when you've gone to hell where you belong. Each of us, me and Lon and Duke, will fight one another like so many wolves after you die, to see who gets the layout. And when you're burnin' in Hell I reckon you'll manage to laugh at us."

Macy caught his breath and his clenched hands relaxed a little. "I'll do my share of the dirty work," he growled, "but you can't make me like the job. I'm headin' for the Lazy P wagon in the mornin' and I know what to do."

He stepped out into the night, closing the door behind him.

Old Seth Lawton sat there in his battered rocking chair, sucking an evil-smelling old pipe that had gone out. His cold blue eyes stared at the closed door, at the melting sleet on the muddy rug. Then a twisted grin wrinkled his leathery face and he took a stiff drink from the bottle. He picked up the lamp and went into his bedroom.

The bedroom was littered with dirty clothes and old boots and hats and riding gear. Chaps, an old saddle, tapaderos, whang leather, all sorts of junk. His tarp-covered blankets were on the floor near a littered table. There was a small stove and a filled wood box. An ancient marble-topped washstand.

From the washstand drawer old Seth Lawton took the stained, faded picture of a girl in the dress of a Mexican dancer. For a long time he looked at it, then put it away. He smiled thinly to himself as he pulled off his boots and overalls. Still clad, save for those articles of clothing, he blew out the lamp and crawled between his blankets.

CHAPTER FIVE

Work for a Doctor

DUKE LAWTON was worried. He had found the cave empty. Some distance from the opening he had found the empty whiskey bottle, but not a trace of the wounded man he had left to die. And the storm had wiped out all sign. Duke spent all day hunting for the man, then returned to the Box X ranch.

"You finished the job?" snapped old Seth.

"I finished it," lied Duke, kicking off his chaps.

"Took you all day," the old cowman grunted. "I reckon you was over to that Injun camp a-girlin'. Well, you come by

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your habits natural. Your dad was a dude like you, always after some hunk of purty calico. Sure you planted that son where nobody'll find his carcass?"

"Nobody'll locate his grave."

"Tomorrow I want you to pull out for town. Stay around Bear Paw till we git ready to take the valley. Do what ribbin' you can. The sooner Jay Cross and Bill Patterson lock horns, the sooner they'll kill one another off. Then we step in. Hang around the Maverick and see what you kin learn. Go light on the booze and keep out of trouble because you might be needed almost any time, and I want you to be ready to take on what trouble starts. Let me know if anything important comes up."

Glad to get away from the ranch, Duke welcomed the trip to town. The disappearance of that wounded gunman bothered him. The man knew too much to live. He knew enough to send the Lawtons, all of them, to the pen. And he knew of old Seth's plan to get Bear Paw Valley for a summer range. Duke cursed himself now for not having killed the man. Because the man had turned yellow, Duke had left him to die a slow, ugly death instead of killing him outright, as he now wished he had done.

Duke knew that the man could not have gotten away alone. Someone had found him. Who? He was still asking himself that question when he stabled his horse that night at Bear Paw. Duke felt uneasy. His swagger was a little forced as he walked into the Maverick. Dutch Louie welcomed him uneasily.

The genial saloon man had ample cause to be uneasy. That wounded man Jay Cross had brought to Doc's house had talked a lot as he tossed in his delirium. His talk had been of killings and the Box X outfit. About being left to die like a trapped wolf. He had cursed the Lawtons, especially Duke. And now here was Duke in town. Did he know about that wounded man over at Doc's house?

"Been sick, Louie?" grinned Duke. "You look kinda peaked."

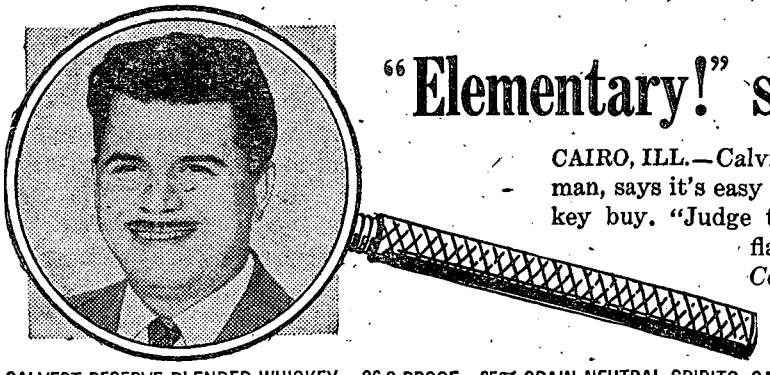
"My stomach vent against me, Duke."

"You got that scalp lock of yourn on kinda jack-deuce," Duke chided him.

Dutch Louie adjusted his toupe and shoved the bar bottle towards Duke.

"That calls for vun on the house, Duke." Dutch Louie's laugh sounded hollow. He took an extra kümmel.

DOC had seen Duke Lawton ride into town and stable his horse. That wounded man in the back room with his wild talk of killings and double-crossings had sent cold chills down the little constable's spine. Now he was alone in the house with the prisoner who was tied down in bed. What if Duke Lawton took the notion to pay him a visit? What if he found that Doc had this wounded man a



"Elementary!" says Watson

CAIRO, ILL.—Calvin Watson, Cairo businessman, says it's easy to pick today's best whiskey buy. "Judge taste, lightness, mildness, flavor—and you'll switch to *Calvert*. I did. Elementary!"

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prisoner? The doctor and sheriff had not showed up. Jay Cross had gone out to his roundup camp. Doc was alone with his prisoner, who was no longer delirious but lay there, tight-jawed, an ugly look in his bloodshot eyes. He lay on his back, tied to the bed securely. He had not spoken after his senses returned, save to ask for whiskey. He was weak from loss of blood. Doc gave him one chance in ten to live.

Doc bolted the doors and windows and pulled the shades. If only Jay Cross would come, bringing with him enough men to take care of Duke Lawton! The paunchy little constable wished for a hundred, more than a hundred, able deputies. Fear had him in its clammy grip. He dared not leave his prisoner, for Duke Lawton would be there in the Maverick.

Again the prisoner asked for a drink of whiskey. "You're the John Law in the valley?"

"I'm the constable," admitted Doc with some reluctance.

"What's the charges against me?"

"Murder," blurted Doc.

The wounded man's eyes were red slits. "Who says so?" he snarled.

There in the lamplight Doc recognized the look of fright in the eyes of the man tied to the bed. The prisoner's fear gave the constable courage. After all, the man was powerless, weak. Something akin to courage pulsed now through the veins of Doc. Unconsciously he rubbed his badge, polishing it. He had helped himself to a stiff drink.

"You are to be tried for murder. I say so. I represent the law in the valley."

The wounded man scowled. Then he grinned crookedly. "I'm willin' to hang for killin' the snake. I wasn't sure I got him. Last I remember is when he rode along the trail. He'd left me to die in that cave. It ain't all clear. I started crawlin' down the trail. He must have been comin' back to see if I was dead. I heard him comin' along the trail and I let him have it. I made wolf bait out of Duke Lawton and I ain't afraid to hang for it. Gimme another drink, mister."

"You say you killed Duke Lawton?" asked Doc, pouring whiskey for the prisoner into the tin cup. Perhaps that stiff drink Doc had taken on an empty, nervous stomach had made him a little light-headed. He chuckled now as he held the cup of raw liquor to the man's mouth.

The wounded man gulped it down like water. There was suspicion in his eyes.

"You mean I didn't kill Duke?"

"He just rode into town," chuckled Doc. "He looked plenty alive to me."

"Then what's the murder charge against me? Talk, you pot-bellied little toadstool. Damn you. what's the game?"

As the man, straining at the ropes that bound him to the bed, snarled like an animal, Doc stepped backward, his round face white, his eyes mirroring terror. His voice stuck in his throat.

The wounded man struggled weakly, cursing. But Jay Cross had done a thorough job of tying up the prisoner. The rope did not bind the man's arms or body. He could move a few inches. But he was helpless as he lay there, struggling vainly.

"You never saw Duke ride into town. Duke's dead. I killed him, I tell you, you fat little fool. I got 'im."

"You got other men, maybe, like that Ed Brown, but you never killed Duke Lawton. He's here in town."

The prisoner begged for a gun. "I got to kill Duke Lawton. I might be dyin', but I'll live long enough to wipe out that snake if you'll give me my gun and send him to me. Or cut me loose and I'll crawl on my belly till I find him and cut him down. Damn you, I say I got to kill Duke Lawton before I hang. I'll take a knife and—"

There was a rapping at the door. Doc shoved a crude gag in the prisoner's

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mouth. The fear that showed on Doc's round face was reflected in the bloodshot eyes of the helpless prisoner.

The rapping at the front door became more insistent. Doc picked up the lamp, then locked the prisoner in the room. His thick knees threatening to give way under him, his hands trembling, Doc went to the front door.

"Who's there?" he asked in a thin voice.

"Bill Patterson," came the impatient answer. "Let me in quick!"

INSIDE the house, Bill Patterson looked hard at the little constable.

"What's wrong, Bill?" asked Doc.

"That's what I'm tryin' to find out. There's somethin' queer goin' on in this valley. Somethin' I can't figure out. Looks like somebody is tryin' to throw a scare into me. Twice I found notes tied to my saddle in the mornin' warnin' me to quit the country. Twice in the past week my beef herd has been stampeded. Part of my remuda was run off and scattered last night. I've found signs nailed to my side of the drift fence tellin' me to quit the country and not come back. I was shot at last night durin' that storm, as I rode from camp out to the herd."

"Got any suspicions, Bill?"

"No. Only that I know that Jay Cross isn't behind it in any way. Jay ain't that breed of man. I fetched in a signed paper clearin' Jay in case I'm murdered. I'm not expectin' the law to take my part. I'll do my own fightin'. But I want you to keep this paper I made out. I don't want Jay Cross hung for another man's crimes. That's all, Doc. Here's the paper. Witness it. Get Dutch Louie's signature on it. Then put it in Louie's safe."

He opened the door and let himself out into the night.

Doc read the signed statement. Here was another complication. The little constable felt as if he was holding a stick of dynamite in his hand with a lighted fuse attached.

His hand was a little unsteady as he witnessed the signature of Bill Patterson. He looked around for a place to hide it until he could pass it into Dutch Louie's safe keeping. At last he decided to carry it with him. The sheriff and the doctor from the county seat should be showing up soon. Then he would be free of his prisoner and he would go up the street to Louie's. He would slip the dangerous paper to the saloon man, somehow. Another fear they would have to share over their pinochle.

* * *

Meanwhile, Jay Cross was not idle. The delirious talk of the wounded man might be the workings of a twisted mind, but Jay thought otherwise. That man had been left to die there in the cave. The cave was in the center of the Lawton range. The man had talked about killing Ed Brown and another man. He had implied that they were all three partners and that there were more in the valley who belonged to the same bunch of hired killers. Jay had hired a couple of these drifting cowboys, not as gunmen, but to handle his cattle. He had learned that Bill Patterson had several of them on his payroll.

Jay had, right after the killing of Ed Brown, made a discovery which he had kept secret. Not far from the scene of the killing he had located a blind gate in the barbwire fence that was the borderline between the Jay Cross and Lazy P ranges. Neither he nor Bill Patterson had made any blind gates in their fence. They had agreed to use only the two main gates which were padlocked. By agreement, each carried a key to the padlocks. Through those two gates in a thirty mile strip of fence, the J Cross and Lazy P cattle were shoved back onto their own-

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ers' ranges. Neither outfit had use for a blind gate.

There, where the wires of the blind gate had been lowered, he'd found the sign of a man and horse that had passed through.

Leaving town, Jay Cross rode toward his roundup camp. He reached camp about third guard time to find Macy Lawton in the mess tent drinking black coffee and eating cold bread and meat. Jay welcomed him with a nod.

"I'm reppin' with your wagon for a spell," said Macy, washing down a mouthful of food with hot black coffee.

"Thought you'd be with your own wagon," said Jay.

"Seth is roddin' the Box X roundup hisself. He took down bad with one of his ornery spells. Gave me and Lon and Duke hell. He sent Lon to the Lazy P wagon and kicked Duke off the ranch. Cussed us all out and accused us of everything from stealin' his cattle to plottin' to kill him. The old cuss, when he busts out in one of his ornery fits thataway, tells it scary. I'm glad to be away from him. He laid us all three out like a steer hide. Have a drink, Jay?"

"Not at camp. I do my drinkin' in town. I don't allow booze in camp. I took a couple of quarts away from that rep of yourn. If you got more than what's left in that bottle, I'll take care of it by bustin' it on the wagon wheel."

MACY LAWTON'S pale eyes narrowed a little. Few were the men who had ever crossed him without paying for their audacity. Macy liked a whiskey bottle better than most men. He never went anywhere without one. He would fight quicker over a bottle than he would over a woman. One of his hands held a tin cup filled with coffee. The other hand held his thick slice of cold beefsteak and bread. Even as slow a gunman as Jay could beat him to the draw.

"I ain't used to takin' any man's orders," he said, his voice metallic and shaking with anger.

"You'll take mine as long as you work with my outfit, mister. Or you'll take your booze and hit the trail. This is my spread and I ramrod it. I'm workin' the herd tomorrow and it will be a shore enough pleasure to cut back every Box X critter. About three hundred head, all told. Make your choice now."

"Men don't talk to me like that and win in the end, Cross. I'm just tellin' you so you'll know what to expect some day. There's a quart of whiskey in my warsack. Take it and give me the two dollars I paid for it. I want them Box X steers shipped."

"I'll collect the quart. Here's the two dollars. That three hundred head of Box X stuff ain't all four-year-old steers. There's some cows and calves and some other stuff from yearlin's up. You got about ninety head of steers old enough to ship."

"What's the idea in gatherin' she stuff and stuff that I don't want shipped?"

"I want all the Box X stuff off my range. I got a bellyful of summerin' your cattle. I'm cleanin' the J Cross range of all stray stuff. Is that plain enough? If it ain't, talk to that rep of yourn that gets off my range with the Box X cattle."

That was a lot of talk to be coming from the quiet-mannered Jay Cross. Macy Lawton savvied that Jay's temper was white hot.

"If I was you," Macy Lawton said, "I'd take a dull butcher knife and cut my throat. It'd be easier in the long run. My rep has worked with your wagon since it started last fall. That 'titles the Box X to ship what I don't cut back when I work my stuff out tomorrow. I'll send that rep of mine back with the stuff I don't want shipped. God knows how much Box X beef has been takin' the wrinkles

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out of the bellies of J Cross cowboys. I'll help you clean up your lousy range, and glad to. I'm here for that purpose. But runnin' off at the head like you done ain't bought you a thing but trouble. More than one man that made enemies of the Lawtons learned that to their sorrow."

"No argument about that," said Jay, smiling faintly. "Got a night horse?"

"Yeah. I got a horse tied to the bedwagon."

"You'll go on last guard in place of that rep of yours. Now you better get out of the tent before this angerin' wakes the cook. See you in the mornin'."

Jay watched him go into the bed tent. Then he poured himself a cup of coffee. The faint snoring of the grizzled old roundup cook ceased. From under the tarp there poked a partly bald head, a pair of sharp blue eyes. The old cook sat up in bed slowly, a grin on his leathery face. He had an old six-shooter in his hand.

"Yuh shore told that Macy Lawton more'n his ears could hold, Jay. It was better'n a circus. But damn it, man, you was spittin' square in the face of a sidewinder rattler when you made your war talk. I laid there, pretendin' to snore, hearin' it all, watchin' it through a hole in the tarp. You standin' there, tantalizin' that gun thrower, with your hand a mile from your gun. But he never had a Chinaman's chance. I had the little snake covered all the time. This old hawglaig of mine ain't gone off many times, but when she does roar, she talks turkey. Jay, I'll dance at your weddin' if you'll fetch me over a cup o' that java. I need somethin' to put me to sleep."

CHAPTER SIX

Gun Trail

JAY CROSS was worried, undecided just what to do. If half or almost any part of what that wounded man had said in his delirium held truth, then the Lawton outfit was planning to take an active part in the Bear Paw Valley war. The Lawtons had framed Jake Burns on that cattle-butchering charge. Then there had been some double-crossing. The man known as Ed Brown had been murdered and the job had been made to look as if the J Cross outfit was behind the killing. Another gunman had been shot down, a third wounded. All three of those men had come to the valley together, they all belonged to the same bunch of hired killers. Killers that were now drawing pay from the Box X as well as from the outfits they had hired out to.

Jay's first impulse had been to fire the strangers and the Box X rep who was working in with them. Then his better judgment told him to wait. The best idea was to confide in the men in his outfit whom he could trust.

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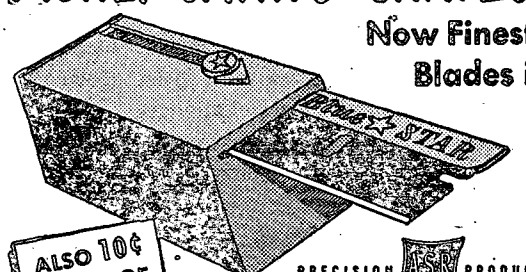

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He woke Jake Burns, who was working with the J Cross outfit, and had him ride a ways out of camp with him. To him Jay told his suspicions and what he thought to be cold facts. Jake Burns was one man he could trust.

"I likewise got several notices to quit the country," he told Jake Burns. "One notice was nailed to the drift fence. Another was painted on the barn door at the ranch a few nights ago. Bill Patterson made his drunken war talk, but Bill never had anything to do with those signs. Old Seth Lawton has always wanted this valley. And when that old rannihan goes after anything, he'll bar no holts. He's got these killers planted in the valley. He's got Macy and Lon to handle the deal. Duke will be in town, like as not, waitin' for the big showdown."

Jay's eyes were smoldering as he paused a moment, went on. "Jake, things are gettin' tight. Mighty tight. Hell's likely to pop open any time. Pass the news to every man you know we kin trust. I've got to be back in town as quick as possible. I'm headed for there now, and I don't know when I'll be back. I'm leavin' you in charge here. Run the spread like you owned it. I busted a bottle of Macy Lawton's whiskey before I left camp. He'll be ornery without it, but I didn't aim to back down on the whiskey rule in camp. Try to keep things runnin' smooth till the cattle are shipped. Most of my cowhands kin be depended on in a tight, if it comes to that. But I don't want a showdown yet."

"Why don't you have a medicine talk with Bill Patterson, Jay?" asked the rancher.

"It's up to Bill to come to me, Jake. I got my reasons for not goin' to him."

"But, hell, he don't know what we're up against here in the valley."

"He will before tomorrow night," came Jay Cross' crisp reply. "Then it will be up to him to prove himself a man or a damned snake. He made the claim he was goin' to run me out of the country. If he's throwed in with the Lawtons to do it, then we're up against a hard proposition. It looks like that's what he's done. But it ain't like Bill to holler for help. He likes to brag, then make good what he's bragged about. It would kind of lower his sights a lot to call in outsiders like the Lawtons to take up his fight for him. I'll see that he hears about what's goin' on, if he don't already know. If he's any part of a white man, he'll act accordin'."

It wasn't like Jay Cross to talk like that. This was the first time any man in Bear Paw Valley had ever heard Jay talk about Bill Patterson. Bill had handled all the talking. Jake Burns knew that Jay was badly worked up to say the things he was saying now. And he took notice of the fact that Jay Cross' gun, which he had been packing lately, was now in a holster tied down to his leg, instead of shoved into the waistband of his Levi overalls. It looked as if the owner of the J Cross iron was actually getting ready for war. And when a man of his quiet, easy-going temperament got on the prod, he was apt to be plenty dangerous.

JAY sent Jake Burns back to camp, then rode on toward town. He grinned faintly, as he remembered telling Macy to go on last guard. That was breaking one of the cow country's unwritten laws. Macy had not gotten to camp until nearly midnight. By rights he should not be made to stand guard that night. But Jay had purposely broken that cowhand law and told Macy to stand last guard. It was the sort of insult a man is supposed to resent—a sort of flung challenge. Macy Lawton had not taken up the challenge. Then there was the matter of the whiskey bottle. Another fighting matter. Macy Lawton, killer, fearless after the manner of his breed, had not taken up the fight. That was not like Macy Lawton.

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No, that little, pale-eyed killer had other reasons for not reaching for his gun. Orders from old Seth, like as not. He was going after the valley now in his own way. He had given his orders to Macy and Lon and Duke. And when the proper time came, they would light the fuse that would blow the peaceful valley into red, hellish warfare.

Neighbor against neighbor—gunning for one another—even as had happened in such range wars as the Lincoln County War in New Mexico and the bloody Johnson County War in Wyoming.

Jay Cross reached the town of Bear Paw about daybreak. He stabled his horse and walked over to Doc's house. There was a light burning behind the drawn blinds. In response to his rapping, Doc, clad in a nightshirt tucked into his trousers, opened the door. One suspender hung down and he had on carpet slippers. He let Jay, in, then bolted the door. He motioned toward the back room.

"The doctor from the county seat is back there with him," whispered Doc. "He says the feller is goin' to die."

"Then we have to get a sworn statement from him, Doc."

Back there in the bedroom Jay found the wounded man sullen.

"All doctors," he snarled, "are liars. I ain't goin' to die. Get to hell out of here and let a man alone. Every one but Jay Cross. I'll make a dicker with him. Pour me a drink, Cross. Have one yourself, after you kick this sawbones and that vet out. Die, hell!"

The sheriff had not come. He was out with a posse on the trail of some train robbers. Doc whispered that to Jay as the latter showed him and the doctor out of the room. The little constable was badly frightened.

"Duke Lawton's in town on a bender," he whispered in Jay's ear.

"Good," grinned Jay, and shut the door.

"Well, feller," he said, pouring two drinks, "what's on your mind?"

"How did I git here?"

In a few sentences Jay explained. The man's face, with its stubble of beard, twitched with pain.

"Then that fat little constable didn't lie when he said Duke Lawton wasn't dead?"

"Doc didn't lie. Duke is in town. He don't know you're here, mebby. Again, on the other hand, he might have trailed us here. We might have been sighted and trailed."

"The little pot-bellied John Law tells me I'm under arrest. Charged with the murder of a gent named Ed Brown and another feller. Is that why I was fetched here?"

"You talked some on the way in. Enough to spill the beans. But the doctor was right when he said you were dying. You won't hang, mister."

"You wouldn't lie to a man, would you, Cross?"

"I'm not lyin'. And I'd have fetched you to town no matter who you were or what you'd done or hadn't done."

"You got the name of bein' a white man, Cross. Duke Lawton is a snake. I might have knowed he'd quit me in a tight. I knowed too much. I didn't kill the man named Ed Brown. Ed Brown ain't his real name. The man that done that killin' murdered him, then made it look like it had been a fight. I shot it out with the snake that was hired by Seth Lawton to kill Ed. Ed, you savvy, was my brother, though none of 'em knowed it. I give his murderer a fightin' chance and killed him. Duke heard the shootin' and rode up while I was finishin' the job. Duke planted him near the cave. You can spot the grave by a tree that had bin lightnin' struck."

"Why was Ed Brown murdered?"

"The same reason they framed that butcherin' charge on Jake Burns. Seth

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wanted a war here in the valley. He ribbed it between you and Bill Patterson. He started ribbin' it at the Prescott Frontier Days contest. I did Duke's dirty work there. Duke framed you and Bill Patterson and the girl that rode in the relay races and did the fancy ropin'. Gail Cavanaugh was her name. . . ."

Jay's face hardened. "What in hell do you mean, mister? Talk and talk fast, damn you!"

"Hand me the bottle, Cross. Then fetch pen and ink and paper. Take down what I tell you, and I'll sign it."

Half an hour later Jay Cross called in Doc and the physician from the county seat.

"Witness this man's signature," he said, his voice strained with pent-up emotion.

The wounded man signed the document. "That's my right name, Cross. See that I'm planted next to Ed. You savvy. And if I was you, I'd hunt up that little lady and explain it all. I've killed men and never lost an hour's sleep about it. But hurtin' that girl was a lot different. It's the only low-down thing I ever did. I've squared my debts. One last drink and then I'll hit the last trail. Just one more drink."

JAY CROSS lacked the cold-blooded brain that goes to make a killer. Slow to anger, always ready to give any man the benefit of the doubt, he had gone his way through life. But now he knew that he could kill a man and never regret it. He pulled the blanket over the face of the dead gunfighter, then he folded the written confession and put it in his pocket. He hitched up his gunbelt and faced Doc.

"You say Duke Lawton is in town?" he asked in a strange voice.

Doc nodded. He had never seen Jay Cross look like that. It sent a cold chill over the little constable.

"Duke Lawton is at the honkytonk or at the Maverick, Jay."

Jay left the house with its dead man, its weary-eyed doctor, who was sipping a tumbler filled with whiskey and water, and the little rotund constable who still had his nightshirt tucked into his trousers.

Jay found the Maverick deserted save for Dutch Louie, who woke from a doze with a start.

Mechanically Louie reached for the kümmel bottle as he blinked bewilderedly. "Ach . . . Yay . . . I been dreaming here. Here, have a nip. You ain't lookin' so goot. Und me. All night I am on my feet. Und all night long that Duke Lawton buys drinks for the house like so much drunken sailors."

"Where's Duke Lawton, Louie?" Jay Cross cut in abruptly.

"He vent by the honkytonk, maybe."

But Jay found the dance hall closed. A sleepy bartender was washing glasses. A swamper was cleaning up a litter of broken glass, cigar and cigarette butts, sodden sawdust. In the cold light of dawn the decorations around the boxes and the small stage looked shabby, soiled, tawdry. There was a red slipper with a broken heel lying in the middle of the dance floor. Empty glasses and bottles were on the liquor-stained tables.

"I'm lookin' for Duke Lawton," Jay told the tipsy bartender.

"He ain't here. He rode his horse in here about an hour ago, bought drinks for everybody, then rode out the front door. He ain't come back."

At the barn he found Duke's horse gone. And in the cold white sunrise he regained his calmness, his sense of reasoning. His fight with Duke Lawton must wait. This was not the time to pick a quarrel. There was too much at stake. There was the safety of the Bear Paw Valley, with its ranchers, its women and children, to consider.

He walked back to Doc's house. He needed sleep.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Battle Orders

IF SOME walls have ears, this must have been true of Doc's house, because the man planted outside the house by the ever-suspicious Duke Lawton had carried Duke news that caused the latter to saddle his horse and quit town. Duke was no coward, but it made him feel more than a little uneasy to know that a dying man had signed a paper that would hang every Lawton.

The trouble was that Duke dared not tell Seth or Lon or Macy the truth about the man who had died at Doc's house. He had lied to old Seth about that man he had left to die in the cave.

Duke's first thought was to kill Doc, Jay Cross and the doctor from the county seat. But that would be putting his head in a noose. A triple killing of that sort was out of the question. There was but one thing left to do. That was to open up the valley war—open it with gunfire. The Box X had men planted with the J Cross and Lazy P outfits. Lon and Macy had their orders from old Seth. They knew how to start the ball rolling.

Duke spurred his horse to a long trot and headed for the J Cross roundup camp. There was no time to lose. That war must start today. And Jay Cross, Doc, every man who knew about that incriminating document, must be killed off. The doctor from the county-seat must get his before he got far along the homeward trail. That document muse be found and burned. Otherwise . . . Duke shivered a little. He wasn't ready to die, and the thought of hanging was not pleasant. He rode with his weight in the stirrups, his big, grain-fed horse carrying him along the trail into the sunrise.

The J Cross cowboys were all at the herd when Duke rode up. Macy was cutting out what stuff he didn't want shipped. When he saw Duke, he rode out to the edge of the herd, motioning for the Box X rep to keep working.

"It's time to open the jackpot," Duke said. "I'm takin' word to Lon. You know what to do. Scatter this herd to hell tonight. The same will happen to the Lazy P herd. See to it that Jay Cross gits his where his suspenders cross."

"Don't worry about that," Macy said. "Got a bottle on yuh?"

Macy looked mad when he handed back the bottle. Duke corked it and rode away, headed for the Lazy P roundup camp. He grinned a little. Macy would kill Jay Cross, even as Lon would take care of Bill Patterson. Cattle would be stampeded and the remudas scattered, setting both outfits afoot save for the played-out horses they would be forking at daybreak. That is, those who were still alive to sit a horse.

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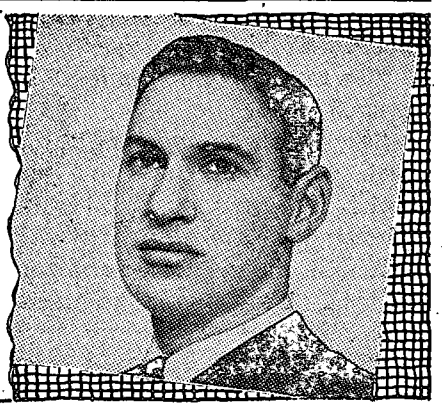

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NOON found Duke at the Lazy P camp. Bill Patterson and his men were eating dinner. Lon eyed Duke meaningly. Duke made no sign.

Bill Patterson's nod was not cordial. Duke filled his plate and tin cup and squatted on the ground. He had not expected much of a welcome.

"I need a fresh horse," Duke told Lon. "Got a ride to make. How's chances to plant my saddle on that crop-eared roan?"

"You'll ride what I stake you to," said Lon, and went on eating in silence.

Bill Patterson grinned faintly. One of the cowboys had said something about Duke beating Lon's time with some girl. Lon had knocked the cowboy down and kicked a few teeth out of his jaw. The Lawtons were all quick to anger, slow to forget that anger. They could carry an enmity forever.

"They tell me, Bill," grinned Duke, "that Jay is wearin' his gun tied low."

Bill Patterson looked up from his plate. "I reckon that's his privilege," he said briefly. Duke's grin faded slowly.

At the corral Lon caught his horse and pointed out another to Duke.

"I ain't ridin' any pack horse," said Duke. He roped the crop-eared roan. There in the center of the rope corral, filled with horses, Duke and Lon eyed one another. No brotherly love was lost in that exchange of glances. Then Lon led his horse out of the corral, Duke following with the big roan.

"I told you," said Duke, when the two were saddling, "I got a ride to make."

"To the breed camp to make a dance," sneered Lon.

"Can't you get anything through that skull you pack around on your dirty neck? Hell pops tonight when the guard goes on at twelve. Scatter these cattle to hell. Kill the nighthawk and run off the remuda. Tend to Bill Patterson personal."

"This ain't no time to start this business," said Lon. "We wasn't to start the game till after we'd shipped."

"We start it tonight," said Duke.

"All right. Let 'er buck. I'll handle my end. See that you handle yourn."

Duke rode away after he had taken the buck out of the big wicked-tempered, crop-eared roan. He reached the Box X ranch before dark.

"What fetches you back here?" snapped old Seth, glaring at his nephew.

"If you want that valley," said Duke, "you'd better git down there tonight and handle the deal. She pops at midnight. Buckle on your hawglaig."

"Who the hell gives the orders here? Are you drunk or just plain loco. *I'll* say when that fight down yonder starts."

"If you wait till after tonight, the game is up with us. I was sent to town to pick up news. I done picked 'er up. Plenty. By daybreak the J Cross and Lazy P outfits will be all the same one happy family. Jay Cross is wise to us now. Bill Patterson and him will be pardners again just as quick as Cross kin git to talk with Bill Patterson. Better round up the boys and take 'em down into the valley. I'll tend to my end in town. I took word to Macy and Lon. The balloon goes up at midnight."

Seth Lawton buckled on his gunbelt. He was at last riding down to take Bear Paw Valley.

DUTCH LOUIE was glad that Duke Lawton had left his place. But he felt uneasy about Jay Cross. Jay had acted queer when he came in, asking for Duke. When Doc came into the empty saloon, there in the dawn, Dutch Louie gave a sigh of relief. He set out the kümmel bottle and two glasses. Then he asked about the wounded man.

"He iss better?"

"He's dead, Louie. The doctor couldn't save him. Here, put this in the safe. It's a statement the man made and signed.

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The doctor and I witnessed it. It's dynamite. There's enough explosive in that statement to send the Lawtons to hell. Jay said for you to lock it up and forget how to open the safe."

Dutch Louie groaned. His pudgy hands opened the safe. He put the document inside, shut the door and spun the knob. Then he faced Doc across the bar.

"A safe full of dynamite, Doc, und I sit by it."

Absently Dutch Louie adjusted his toupe. Brothers in misery, the two drank in silence. Weary as they were, sleep was beyond question. There was nothing to do but wait for the worst to happen. And had they known the plan that had formed in Duke Lawton's mind they would both have had material cause for real worry.

Duke had thought it out carefully, soberly, as he left the Box X and, quitting Seth at the forks of the trail, took the main road to town. Rightly Duke figured that Jay Cross would not be carrying that signed document with him. Dutch Louie owned the only safe in town. Therefore that damaging document would be in Dutch Louie's safe. While the others were stampeding herds and shooting one another, Duke planned to get that document. Once it was destroyed, he would do his share of fighting.

As Duke rode into town by a side street and left his horse at the rear of the saloon, he slipped his black silk neckerscarf up so that it covered the lower part of his face. His gun in his hand, he slipped into the saloon by the rear door. The hands of the big clock above the back bar pointed to midnight.

Save for Doc and Dutch Louie playing pinochle at one of the tables, the place was deserted. Duke Lawton grinned behind his black silk mask.

"Take it easy, you two." His harsh voice brought the pinochle players erect, wide-eyed with fear. "Do what I tell you and there won't be a shot fired. Constable, throw that purty gun of yourn in the corner. You, Louie, open that safe of yourn and make it fast. Make any mistakes, and I'll gut-shoot you!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

The War Breaks

DUKE LAWTON had not counted on Jay Cross riding over to the Lazy P camp as soon as he could get there. Bill Patterson and his cowboys had just come in from working the afternoon drive and were unsaddling. Bill scowled at Jay without speaking.

"I want to see you alone, Bill. It's important, or I wouldn't be here."

"I ain't got all day," said Bill, as the two rode off some distance from camp. "Is it fight talk?"

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"It's fight talk, all right, but nothing like you have it figured. The Lawtons aim to stomp us both out. Our best bet is to beat 'em to it. I got proof in black and white that will hang 'em all."

For half an hour Jay talked. Then the two ex-friends rode back to camp. Most of the cowboys were eating. Lon Lawton and another man were saddling up fresh horses; and there was suspicion written in his eyes. Several other fresh horses were saddled. Lon must have passed along word of his suspicions, because the men who had saddled fresh mounts were cowboys Bill Patterson and Jay Cross knew to be friends of the Lawtons, hired to make trouble in the valley.

"Had supper, Lon?" Bill asked carelessly, as he and Jay rode.

"I took on a bit of what that grub spoiler calls a meal," Lon sneered.

"Then you might as well take these men here and relieve the men out at the hold-up. I'll be out directly."

Bill stepped down off his horse and looped his stirrup over the saddle horn. Lon and his men had the advantage of Bill and Jay, just now. The Lazy P cowboys Bill could count on were eating, not suspecting trouble. Lon and his men were on fresh horses. The others had not caught their new mounts yet. They were afoot. The edge was all Lon Lawton's. But would he take advantage of it?

Lon's men, all mounted now, waited for the signal to open up the fight.

For a long moment, a moment during which Jay and Bill waited with taut nerves, Lon hesitated. Then he turned and rode away, the others following him. Old Seth Lawton would never have done that. Old Seth would have shot it out while the odds were in his favor.

Bill and Jay caught fresh horses. Then Bill spoke to his men.

"Never mind the grub, boys. Saddle up and pack your guns. We're takin' Lon Lawton and them men he rode off with. They'll put up a fight, and a hard one."

"Lead us to 'em," grinned a lanky cowboy. "That pack of gun-toters was gettin' into my hair and whiskers. My meat is that one-eyed crook that won two months pay off me with his trained dice. I'm goin' to empty that jasper's pockets."

"Which direction is the hold-up?" asked Jay.

Bill started to point as he swung into the saddle. Then an oath escaped him. Lon and his four men were headed in the other direction, spurring hard for an outcropping of big boulders half a mile away. The full import, the real significance of this visit of Jay's to camp had finally penetrated Lon Lawton's thick black skull. Why wait till midnight? He cursed himself for not starting the fight there at camp. Turning in his saddle, he jerked his carbine and emptied it at the oncoming riders. He grinned as he saw a rider reel in his saddle and pull up.

LON and his men gained the rocks, there on the creek bank among the brush and cottonwoods. Dismounting, they sought shelter, prepared to make a bloody stand.

"We'll circle 'em, Bill," called Jay, jerking his Winchester lever. "Play Injun on 'em. Lon Lawton is the one that counts. I want that big son alive."

As the afternoon passed into sundown, Lon and his men, from their barricade of boulders, put up a cool-headed, deadly fight against odds. Several Lazy P men bore wounds that proved the marksmanship of those imported gunmen. Every time Jay Cross or Bill Patterson showed any part of themselves they were showered with lead. Lon and his killers were concentrating on the two cowmen. Occasionally Jay or Bill would raise one of their hats on a stick to see whether Lon's men were still alert, but always bullets greeted them.

There came a lull in the firing. Bill

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and Jay held a whispered conference. Both had been nicked by that hail of bullets. Night was not far off.

Bill hoisted a white rag on a stick. Instantly it drew a volley of shots. Bill grinned a little, examining the bullet-torn flag of truce.

"Looks like we'll have to close in on 'em, Jay."

"Looks that way. I'll give 'em one more chance to surrender." Jay raised his voice to a shout. "Turn over Lon Lawton to us and the rest of you can quit the country. If Lawton don't want you all killed, he'll be man enough to give himself up."

"Go to hell!" roared Lon Lawton.

There was the crack of a gun. Lon's profane bellow choked off. Silence.

Then a white flag was waved from the boulders. Bill raised his tattered white rag on its stick. A momen't hesitation, then a big, black gelding wearing the Box X brand broke from the boulders and brush. The horse wore no bridle. Across the saddle was a ghastly, bloodstained burden, held by a lariat. Thus his hired killers had delivered Lon Lawton to his enemies. Jay's rope snared the big black gelding. Lon was dead, shot in the back. He had paid his price.

Into the sunset vanished the hired killers, quitting Bear Paw Valley forever.

Jay and Bill pushed on for the J Cross wagon. A messenger had already gone ahead with a message to Jake Burns to grab Macy Lawton and any other man who might be in the Lawton employ.

* * *

A lantern burned in the mess tent and another in the bed tent, there at the J Cross camp. Three men in the bed tent were bound hand and foot. There was another whose body was covered with a blood-stained tarp. He needed no ropes to hold him there. Two cowboys, both slightly wounded, guarded the prisoners.

In the mess tent lay Jake Burns, badly wounded. He forced a grin.

"Macy was too fast for me, Jay. He got away. I think I hit him once, but I'm not certain. He headed for town like a bat out of hell."

"I'll send a doctor from town, Jake. Let's go, Bill. They musn't get that paper in Louie's safe."

With Jay and Bill now rode half a dozen picked men. They rode into town just about the time Duke Lawton was forcing Dutch Louie behind the bar.

Now, from the other end of the moonlit street there came other riders, Seth Lawton and Macy in the lead, spurring hard.

Inside the saloon, under the ugly menace of Duke's gun, Dutch Louie's thick hands fumbled clumsily with the safe's combination. Sweat rolled down his florid face. His precious toupe had slipped partly off. Duke cursed him in a rasping voice.

The paunchy little Doc stood by the card table with its unplayed cards, its two steins of beer and small glasses of kümmel. He stood petrified, unable to move.

Duke Lawton, impatient at Dutch Louie's lack of speed, vaulted the bar with a barked oath. He kicked the stooping Louie in the ribs and face. Blood spurted.

The sight of that blood, of the masked robber kicking Dutch Louie, had a startling effect on Doc. With surprising agility he retrieved his gun from the floor. His voice was steady, commanding.

"Hands up!"

Duke Lawton whirled with a snarl, his gun spewing flame. Doc felt the shock of a bullet in his thigh. As fast as he could thumb back the hammer, he shot at the masked man. A lucky bullet tore the gun from Duke's hand. He groped for the gun with his left hand but Dutch Louie, with a roar like an enraged bull, was upon

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him, swinging a heavy wooden mallet known as a bung starter.

Unarmed, Duke ran for the rear door. There was a carbine on his saddle and an extra six-shooter. His black silk neckscarf had slipped from his face. Doc, still working the hammer of his empty gun as he lay in a widening pool of blood, cursed the most dangerous of the deadly Lawtons for a yellow-bellied coyte. Dutch Louie, his face bleeding from a broken nose, swore thickly in his native tongue as he rounded the bar to give chase, still armed with his bung starter.

But the real fight was now out there in the night. Guns spat fire from the deep shadows. Horses, terrified by the shooting, lunged and milled together in the moonlit street. Dutch Louie carried his wounded friend down into the cellar, bolting the heavy trap door from below. He got a lantern going and set about dressing Doc's wounds.

CHAPTER NINE

Bloody Sunrise

IN THE darkness outside it was every man for himself. Friend and enemy looked alike in the dark. Jay and Bill had told their men to stay in their places and not advance or retreat unless ordered.

Now the Lawton outfit made a rush for the saloon. A quick volley put out the saloon lights. Once barricaded in the darkened interior, Seth Lawton snapped brittle orders, as from the windows his men took snapshots at J Cross and Lazy P men.

Duke cursed his maimed hand and the closed safe. There in the darkness, he kept searching for Dutch Louie. Convinced that the saloonkeeper was not in the place, he set to work trying to force open the old safe.

Seth cursed him for wasting his time. "What the hell you tryin' to bust in there for? There ain't enough in that old iron box to bother about. Go back to that rear end of the place and take charge of your men. We want Jay Cross and Bill Patterson, not what that sauerkraut eater keeps in his safe."

Duke obeyed, snarling curses. The thumb and forefinger of his right hand had been partially shot away. One of his men had stopped the bleeding somewhat with a tourniquet of buckskin string, searing the raw stubs with coal from the big stove. Duke had endured the pain without a whimper. His only worry was that incriminating paper in the safe. A paper that would put a noose around his neck.

Seth Lawton was like a man gone insane. His carefully laid plans had been scrambled into junk. Somebody had talked out of turn. Who? He swore to cut the tongue out of the man who had talked, then kill him. Seth never accepted an excuse from any man. No man working for him could make a mistake and get away with it.

"Somebody was careless," he told Duke and Macy. "His damned mistake has cost us the valley. Even if we git Jay Cross and Bill Patterson, they'll have us up for gunfightin', and it'll take a hell of a pile of money to clear us. And more money to git the J Cross and Lazy P outfits. What in hell become of Lon, anyhow? Why ain't he here?"

"Maybe he's got a reason," Duke had insinuated. "Maybe he made a bad mistake. He ain't any too smart in the head."

"A thousand dollars," old Seth told them all, "to the man who kills Jay Cross. Another thousand for Patterson's hide."

Daylight would be coming soon. Jay and Bill had their men surround the saloon, using what they could find for shelter from the Lawton gunfire.

"Don't let the Lawtons get away," was the grim order. "Kill them if you have to."

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Jay and Bill met, just before daybreak.

"About that Prescott fight of ourn," said Bill, "I sure made a fool outa myself. I was lied to and I was jealous. Soon as this deal is over, Jay, you ketch the first train for Arizona. I'll handle your cattle. Fetch her back and I'm standin' the big weddin' party. She thinks you're the greatest feller livin'. She'll be waitin' for you, pardner. Me, I never had a chance with her. And about me runnin' you out of the country, that was whiskey talk. When I sobered up and remembered, I felt like a sheepherder."

"Forget it, Bill. As far as me goin' to fetch Gail, that's for her to decide when we go down there together. She used to like you a lot. Same as she liked me. It's up to her, pardner. As for the whiskey talk, I never aimed to let you make a plumb fool of yourself. I'd have quit the country before I'd have tangled up in a gun war."

"You always did have more guts than me, Jay. It would have took plenty of them guts to move out leavin' folks to think you was too yellow to fight. You're a white man, Jay. Mind shakin' hands?"

"The pleasure, you damn bonehead, belongs to me."

DAWN came in a crimson streak. The men outside watched it stain red the mountains that were snowcapped. The men inside the saloon, that now was a shambles, saw no snow-capped peaks, for their vision was limited to the immediate surroundings. Through shattered windows they watched, bloodshot eyes peering furtively, guns cocked. Whiskey bottles passed from hand to hand.

Seth Lawton, squatted by a hole he had gouged in the chinking between the logs, cursed in a steady monotone. Macy, a Winchester in his hand, kept moving about from the front of the place to the rear.

Duke, drinking whiskey as if it were water, driven away from the safe by old Seth, guarded the rear door. He had made a peep-hole and through this he watched. His right arm pained him some. But his brain seemed afire. He shot at anything that moved, out there in the back that was piled with whiskey barrels and beer kegs that had been made into a barricade.

Now both factions suddenly ceased firing. Coming into town at a long lope were half a hundred men.

"It's the sheriff," gritted old Seth, his face gray, twisted with a terrible hate. "He's got a whole damn army with him. Macy, git word back to Duke that the jig's up. We can't stand off the whole of Montana. If we start shootin' into that posse, we'll all be killed or hung. As she lays now, we kin pay our way out of it. Tell Duke we're layin' 'em down."

Macy took the word to Duke. Duke's

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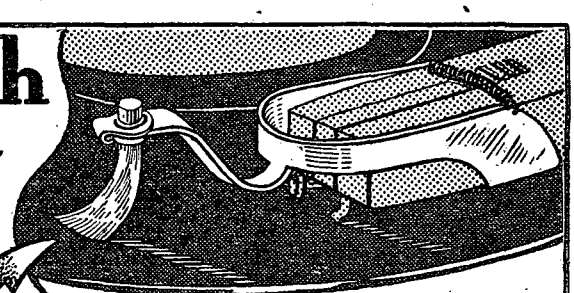
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face went livid. His eyes, killer's eyes, glittered.

"Give up to the law?" he gritted. "Is the old fool yellow? Has he lost his guts?" His six-shooter swinging in his left hand, he stalked past Macy and into the front of the saloon. He faced old Seth.

"In that safe," he said flatly, "is a signed paper that will hang us all. You raised me to be a tough hand. I'm playin' my string out. You and Macy kin quit like yellow dogs, but I'm fightin' my way out."

Old Seth's lipless mouth twitched a little. "Damn you, Duke, you always was my favorite of the three whelps."

The old cowman's face was the color of ashes that had lain long on the ground. His eyes burned with queer lights. His unwashed old blue flannel shirt was sticky with blood.

"I ain't got much to lose," he said, shoving cartridges into his six-shooter. "Supposin' we step out yonder and fight 'em in the open?"

* * *

It was a sight that is still remembered in Bear Paw. The three Lawtons, old Seth in the lead, dying, his legs unsteady, walking out of the saloon, into the red-streaked sunrise, their guns blazing.

The sheriff and his posse pulled up, hunting cover. Now the three Lawtons held the street, their guns smoking.

"Come out and fight!" called old Seth. "Come out and fight, you yellow-bellied polecats!"

Jay Cross started to quit his shelter behind a long pile of cordwood. A six-shooter barrel thudded down on his head and he dropped to the ground. With a quick leap Bill Patterson cleared the wood pile and was out there in the open, his gun roaring, a grin on his face.

Duke went down, lay there in the dusty street, motionless. Seth's bullet dropped Bill to his knees, shooting as he went down. Now Macy staggered and fell. He twitched a little, then lay still.

Bill Patterson's gun was empty. His numbing fingers fumbled at his cartridge belt. Old Seth, gun cocked, watched him.

"You bragged once, Patterson," he cried hoarsely, "that you was man enough to handle the whole damn Lawton tribe. You got two of us. Load that gun an' try again."

"Be right with yuh, Seth," called Bill Patterson, his grinning lips bloody.

But even as Bill fitted a cartridge into the chamber of his gun, the old he-wolf of the Box X went down in a crumpled heap. The last of the Lawtons was dead.

Jay Cross, his head still throbbing from the blow Bill had handed him, sat there in the street wiping the blood from Bill's mouth. The sheriff's men had taken the saloon and were busy caring for the prisoners.

"So-long, Jay, old pardner," grinned Bill. "I'm sorry about hittin' you over the head thataway, but it had to be done. Gail will need you, understand? I'm kinda put out, not bein' able to give you and her that weddin' party. Tell her so-long for me, Jay."

"I'll tell her, Bill."

"Take care of her, pardner. Good luck to . . . you . . . both."

THE LITTLE cow town of Bear Paw has not changed much. Doc is no longer constable, but his ornate gun and badge are there on display at the Maverick Saloon. Doc and Dutch Louie still have their pinochle and beer.

Sometimes Jay Cross and his wife and their youngster, Bill, come to town, but not very often, because Jay is busy with the J Cross and Lazy P outfits. The Lazy P belongs to little Bill, whose namesake died for the love of a pardner and his love for a girl.

THE END

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MAN-TRAP

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The two guns flamed in unison as Steep's second shot mingled with the slam of Bud's .45. . . .

By Cliff Farrell

There's more than one way of skinning a cougar, young Bud Elliot figured; and as for collecting for same—Bud would do that if he had to ram his skins right down skinflint Muddy Wickwire's craw with the hot end of a .45!

MUDDY WICKWIRE, owner of the Corkscrew T, sat in the squalid, littered big room of his ranch house, squinting at the weekly edition of the *Stockmen's News*. Behind him a door opened softly and Ink Steep, his range boss, slipped into the room. The

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flabby-faced foreman leaned close in the habitual pose of secrecy he and Wickwire always assumed, no matter how trivial the conversation.

"Hey, Muddy," Steep whispered, jerking a thumb toward a grimy window that had not known the touch of soap and water since the house had been built. "Here comes that young Elliot hombre—the one what was here last fall, an' agreed to trap cougars an' loafers up in the Chaparrosas at so much per head."

Wickwire's worn bootheels hit the floor, and he peered out. Despite the gloom of the interior, fresh morning sunshine bathed the range. On the horizon rose the peaks of the Chaparrosas, their upper levels still dappled with snow.

A lanky young fellow in worn garb was entering the ranch yard. His leather windbreaker was patched at the elbows with rawhide and the two scrawny packhorses which he lead, and gaunt flop-eared dogs that followed, gave every evidence that the outfit had endured a hard winter. But there was a grin on the long-jawed face of the rider that told of success.

"Do you reckon that pack on the first lead horse is filled with pelts?" Muddy whispered.

"Reckon so," Steep admitted reluctantly. "Them's his traps an' bed gear on the second animal. Whatcha goin' to do?"

Wickwire did some rapid and crafty thinking. He and his range boss were well paired, despite their varied size and appearance. Wickwire was thin, shrunken, with yellowish skin, and looked as though he habitually denied himself more than the barest necessities of life. His mouth seemed equipped with drawstrings that he always kept tight. Rumor on the range had it that Muddy's pocketbook was even more tightly closed. Steep was big and flabby, with eyes too small to fit well with his huge jaws. His jet-black hair was thick, unruly, and a dark stubble masked his chin.

THE VOICE of Bud Elliot, the rider, hailed the ranch. Wickwire led the way to the stoop. There, with Steep at his elbow, he stopped and eyed young Elliot stonily. The latter had dismounted and was eagerly looking around. After six months in the high snow country, this lower range with its new spring grass and grazing cattle was but little short of Paradise to Bud.

"Howdy, Wickwire," he said cheerfully. "Here I am—with the best bunch of good news you ever bent yore eyes on. Wait—I'll show 'em to you."

Bud turned to the first pack animal, slipped the hitch and muscled the big bundle to the ground. Opening it, he began rapidly to spread out pelts in an endless succession.

Wickwire and Steep gazed in heavy silence. Bud Elliot finally stepped back, grinning, and began to build a smoke.

"Count 'em," he said. "Sixteen cougars, eight loafers an' three silver-tips. I got the bears this last week. I'm not chargin' for 'em, though. You only agreed to pay for cats an' wolves. But the bears was killin' calves, too, so I knocked 'em over."

Wickwire cleared his throat. "Nice bunch o' hides," he agreed. "Whatcha goin' to do with 'em? There's no bounty on 'em in this state this year."

Young Elliot paused in the act of lighting a match. He stood there for a few seconds eyeing the rancher from beneath his hat brim. Then his lean face gradually tightened, his form stiffening to its full six feet of whip-like height.

In that instant Bud Elliot had realized that he was stung. He might have known that Muddy Wickwire would welch.

"You agreed to pay me forty a head for every loafer, an' thirty for every cat I trapped on the Corkscrew Range," he finally said slowly. "My calculations show that you owe me eight hundred dollars, Wickwire."

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"Got it in writin'?" Wickwire asked with a smirk.

Steep drew to his side, and bent a menacing glance on the young trapper.

Bud placed his hands on his hips, and his eyes began to glow like a hot branding iron.

"Nope, I haven't got it in writing," he said. "But that was the agreement. You're makin' plenty on this deal, an' you know it, Wickwire. These critters would have wiped out more than a hundred head of stock for you this year, if I hadn't salted them. An' think what they'd take from you next season—an' the next. These are the cheapest dollars you ever spent."

Wickwire was congratulating himself on his own shrewdness. The Corkscrew T losses from cougars and wolves had been heavy for many seasons. In the past the trappers he had hired failed to make any dent in the pests. Now, young Elliot had done the trick, and it would cost him, Wickwire, not a cent.

"What if I did give you a little somethin'?" the rancher offered magnanimously. "What would yuh do with the money, young feller?" Then he hastened to add, "Understand, I'm not sayin' that I will. Heck, how do I know yuh trapped them animals on my range. Maybe you bought them pelts from somebody."

Bud drew a step nearer, his face suddenly impassive. "I don't see that it's any of yore business what I do with my long green, Muddy," he said almost genially. "But so you won't lay awake worryin' about it, I'll tell yuh. I aim to buy more she whiteface stuff to help build up our E Slash E brand."

"I reckon so," Wickwire shouted in sudden anger. "You an' that fool brother of yours are determined to crowd into this range with yore shoestring outfit, hey? Well, danged if I'm goin' to furnish you the money to do it with. Not by a mile, I ain't."

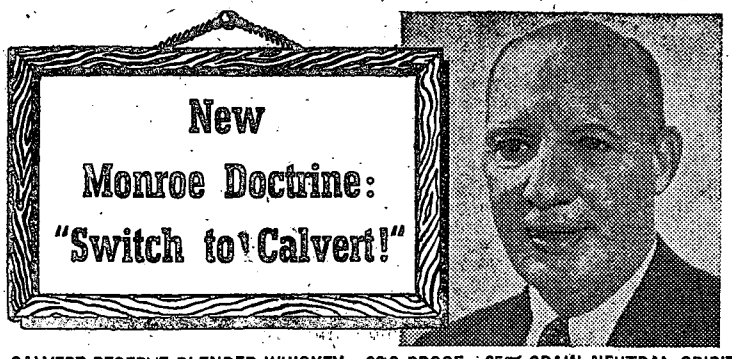
Bud moved nearer. He was at the steps now.

"We've got plenty of range down on the Little Bullet," he said. "An' it doesn't come within ten miles of crowdin' you, Muddy. You're a grass hawg, that's all. You can't even use half the range you've got fenced, an' you know it. Most of it's government land at that. But you don't want to see anyone else makin' a livin' with cattle. Well, Sam an' myself have started our brand, an' it's here to stay on this range."

He paused. "Now, do you pay me for those kills, or do I have to take it out of yore own hide?"

Ink Steep thought it time to take a hand. "G'wan, you pin-eared, half-cooked sliver o'—"

The Corkscrew T range boss broke off shortly as a hurricane swept violently upon him.



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BUD ELLIOT'S long left arm flashed out, and Steep felt one foot jerked abruptly from beneath him. He gave a yell as he toppled, but it was cut off instantly by the impact of a hard fist on his mouth. The fist registered a bull's-eye while the range boss was still in mid-air. Then his body landed on the stoop with a dazing crash. Bud, in the next instant, jerked Steep's sixgun from its holster and tossed it with a splash into the water trough.

Wickwire, gurgling consternation, turned to flee into the ranch house although Bud had made no motion to go for the .45 that swung at his side. Wickwire was clawing frantically at the latch of the door when powerful fingers closed on his belt.

"You fish-faced, double-dealin' old wampus," Bud bellowed. "I ought to kick you loose from yore Adam's apple."

And with a savage jerk, he swung the Corkscrew owner around, headed him toward the steps and booted him to the ground. Wickwire stumbled to his knees, but Bud followed and booted him erect. The rancher landed with his thin legs in full motion.

Bud saw two punchers, with tongs and hammers in their hands, poke startled heads from the blacksmith shack near the corral.

"Time to mosey, I reckon," he said, and with a stride, was swinging on his horse.

The two hounds, growling and baring their teeth, were regarding Ink Steep as he scrambled, crab-fashion, away from them.

"Call off these snarlin' curs," Steep yelped. "They're figgerin' on tearin' me into chunks."

"Never mind that skunk—Buck . . . Julius," Bud called to the dogs. "You'll get hydrophobia if you bite him."

The two punchers had ducked into the blacksmith shop, but now they reappeared with six-shooters ready in their hands.

Bud jerked his rifle from the boot, and levered in a shell. "Back up," he yelled, "or I'll shore vaccinate you."

The range was a trifle long for sixguns against a rifle, so the pair again hastily disappeared into the shack. Muddy Wickwire had now reached the shack and he too dove for safety.

Bud looked regretfully at the pelts. They still lay on the ground, but he knew that to try and take them with him would mean disaster. Already one of the punchers had escaped from the rear of the smithing shack and was running, crouched low, to the bunkhouse. Bud knew the fellow was after a rifle, and also that he would be picked off easily from a bunkhouse window in another second or two.

So he snapped the end of the whale line on the two pack animals, and with the hounds baying defiance, the outfit rattled out into the range.

Spat! A rifle cracked from the bunkhouse door.

Bud's gun whipped an instant reply. But neither bullet found a target. And a swell in the range now sheltered Bud.

He flailed his outfit along at a racking pace for another two miles. Then, sure that there was no immediate pursuit, he slowed to a walk and the animals had a chance to get their wind.

Bud's mind was lost in gloomy thought as he ambled slowly over the range.

"Six months' hard work wasted—an' that ol' vinageroon gets the benefit of it," he groaned. "Sam told me to sign Wickwire up tight an' hard to a contract, but me, bein' a trustful, innocent boob that shouldn't be allowed off a hackamore, didn't do it. An' now I haven't got any evidence that I trapped those animals."

He paused and looked back, rage boiling in his veins. By hominy, he'd go back there and put a bullet in Wickwire's craw! By gawsh, he'd get a wagon, and go farther north into the Chaparrosas,

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where there were plenty more cats and wolves, and bring a load of 'em back alive. Turn 'em loose on Wickwire's range, that's what he'd do. They'd soon eat up eight hundred dollars' worth of Corkscrew T stock—with plenty of compound interest.

But more solid thought caused him to head southward gloomily. Bud knew that his older brother, Sam, needed him on the ranch, now that spring had come, and calf branding time was near. They had only some three hundred head in the E Slash E brand, but there were fences to build and other chores to do.

Bud's smoldering gray eyes were automatically reading the brands and judging the condition of the scattered cattle as he rode along. He was heading toward a low arm of foothills, outflung from the Chaparrosas. Beyond these hills he would strike the headwaters of the Little Bullet. Twenty miles down that valley was the E Slash E spread that he and his brothers had built three seasons earlier.

All the cattle in sight bore the Corkscrew T, for Muddy Wickwire ranged some ten thousand head. Bud started guiltily as a disturbing thought struck him. It would not be difficult to rustle eight hundred dollars' worth of calves. Also there was plenty of rustling going on in this region, and one more steal wouldn't cause much of a fuss.

Then he put the temptation from him. "I hate a rustler worse than I do a snake," he admitted. "Wickwire deserves it, but I wouldn't stoop that low just to get square with him. I'll find some way to do it honest, or not at all." And spurring his horse, he rode on to the E Slash E.

BACK at the Corkscrew T, Muddy Wickwire and Ink Steep had their heads together again and were whispering behind their hands in the big room of the ranch house. Wickwire was standing, because it had become very painful for him to sit down. Steep's lips were puffed and his nose swollen.

"A thunderin' lot of help you was," Wickwire was criticizing bitterly. "Why didn't you put a slug in that squirt?"

"How did I know he was going to jerk my laig from under me," Steep complained, "I was all set to bust him on the jaw—an' then he tripped me. It wasn't fair, dawgone it!"

"Well, anyway, I saved eight hundred dollars," Wickwire said, and that thought gave him considerable comfort. Dollars were worth more than pride to Muddy Wickwire.

"Huh," Steep said doubtfully. "How do you know you have?"

His employer favored him with a withering glare. "What are you talkin' about? He's got nothin' in writin'. An' now he ain't even got the pelts to prove he ever trapped any varmints."

"Yeah, but you've got a rangeful of cow critters. What's to stop young Elliot from collectin' his bill by rustlin' a few calves? Didn't think o' that, did you?"

Muddy Wickwire looked startled—and then dismayed. He sat down at his desk but rose quickly with a curse of pain.

Then suddenly he snapped his fingers, his face lighting. He picked up the copy of the *Stockmen's News*, and spread it out.

"See that," he whispered, pointing. "Or can you read? The county commissioners have put up a reward of five hundred dollars a head for every rustler that's caught in this county."

Steep looked cynical. "What're they gonna use for money? This county has been busted for twenty years."

"I betcha I could make a deal with 'em, so that I could git the reward credited against my taxes," Wickwire said.

"What're you talkin' about?" Steep snorted. "You ain't caught no rustlers."

"No, but I'm goin' to ketch one."

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"Huh." Then a great light dawned on Steep. He dropped his voice to a bare murmur. "Yuh mean young Elliot?"

Wickwire dropped a significant eyelid. "Sure."

"But what if he don't rustle none of our stock?"

Wickwire exposed his broken teeth. "Then we'll see to it that he's nabbed with some of our critters in his possession. Maybe we can rope his brother in on it too. That'll mean a thousand dollars in reward—or tax credit."

Steep's little eyes took on a gleam of satisfaction as he tenderly fingered his sore lips. "It'd be a cinch," he said. "Just spot a few of our calves in their herd, then bring the sheriff an' our she stuff to claim the dogies."

"That's the way," Wickwire approved. "But first, we'll tail young Elliot. He might save us the trouble. Come on. We better ride. He's got half an hour edge on us now. I figger that if he does any rustlin' he'll do it quick—while he's still mad."

AT NOON, Bud topped the low shoulder of the Chaparrosas and began wending down into the Little Bullet watershed. There was no snow here, but rivulets from the run-off tinkled in every pine-shaded draw and notch.

Suddenly Bud halted his string. The hounds, Buck and Julius, had come to attention, their ears fanning out stiffly.

A mile distant, in the bottom of a shallow ravine that ran straight as an arrow southward from where Bud sat his saddle was a crawling brown dot, like a many-legged lizard.

Cattle—sixty or seventy head—and flanked by three riders. Bud saw that the stock was all she-stuff—cows and their calves.

They were being hurried along at a stiff pace for such weak stock. That, and the fact that these were undoubtedly Cork-screw T critters, and were being rushed southwest along a trail that offered a maze of hiding places to the unlawful, told the story.

"Rustlers," Bud said, his face grim.

He sat there silently as the stolen cattle disappeared around a turn in the canyon. Conflicting emotions struggled within him.

"Well, it's none o' my fish to fry," he argued aloud. "Let Muddy Wickwire an' Ink Steep chase their own rustlers."

Then, in opposition to his declaration, he turned, and began pushing his outfit along the rim until he had come within distant sight of the rustlers again. Silently he continued to follow them as they wound down the canyon, reached a fork and turned south through a narrow draw, along which foamed a rushing creek.

The fact was that Bud could not find it in his heart to shirk what was to him his simple duty—a duty that might lead him to his death. Rustlers were becoming the scourge of the cattle growers, growing more impudent and bold each year. It had become a question of survival now. And Bud, who had cattle as his very birthright, looked upon rustlers as he did upon calf-killing wolves and cougars—as pests to be driven, at all costs, off the range.

At times Bud was within easy rifle range of the three men who were hazing the stolen stock. But the thought of killing humans so mercilessly was not in his makeup. To try to capture them by open attack was also out of the question. He could see that they were well equipped to take care of themselves, for each rider packed a brace of six-shooters, and a carbine or rifle beneath his fender.

After an hour of careful sight trailing, Bud nodded to himself. The rustlers had followed a steady course down the stream, which was known as Alder Creek.

"They'll camp at the fork, sure, rest the critters, an' then push 'em on when

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the moon comes up," he told the hounds.

Bud knew this country like the palm of his hand. Alder Creek joined Little Bullet some eight miles farther on, in a little grassy flat that would form a natural holding ground for a small bunch like this.

Bud halted his outfit and looked at the pack horse, whose load was composed mainly of steel traps. His eyes lighted with a sudden thought. There were some thirty wolf traps in that load, as well as smaller ones for martin, mink and beaver. Also a bear trap, but Bud dismissed that with a shudder.

He started the horses ahead suddenly, with vigor, having made a sudden decision. Quickly he circled away from the rim of Alder Canyon and began covering ground southward.

AN HOUR before dark, Bud reached the fork. He estimated that it would be dark before the rustlers arrived. He had circled well around them before approaching the creek again.

He surveyed the flat with an expert eye. "They'll camp under the pines beside that pool," he declared. "It's the best spot, because by stringin' ropes in the trees they can corral their horses right beside 'em in case they need a quick getaway."

He rode to the spot. It was built to order for a camp. An ample space, clear of brush and carpeted by pine needles, it sloped gently down to a shallow pool in which trout made streaks of dark lightning. To the left was a big deadfall of yellow pine which offered a natural windbreak for a cook fire. Downstream, canyon walls rose abruptly and the clatter of rapids could be heard. Backing up the campsite, ten yards from the pool's edge, were shoulder-high boulders, flanked by wild rose bushes and seedling pines.

"Lemme see," Bud speculated. "If I was settin' here by a campfire, an' some gent opened up on me with shootin' irons from the canyonside—I'd dive either behind that deadfall or back of the boulders, dependin' on which was handiest."

Accordingly he turned to the pack horse and unloaded the traps. Then he worked feverishly for nearly half an hour.

"That'll do," he finally said, stepping back and wiping perspiration from his brow.

Purple dusk was deepening tonight. And as though the completion of his task had been a signal, Bud heard the faint bawl of tired cattle drift down the wind. The rustlers were coming!

Hastily, Bud put the dogs on leash, with a stern order for silence, and moved his entire outfit down into the lower canyon, tethering them well beyond earshot. Then he crept back, his rifle in his hand, his six-shooter loose in its holster.

He reached a spot on higher ground that overlooked the dusty campsite, in time

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to see the weary cattle drifting into the flat. The stolen critters drank thirstily and then settled down. They would need no tending that night.

The three rustlers came loping nearer. Bud mentally patted himself on the back, for they were unloading at the spot he had selected.

They turned their horses into a quickly made rope corral among the trees and soon had a fire going.

Total darkness had descended now. The fire blazed brightly as brush was fed to it.

Bud tensed. He felt cold all over. But now was the time to act. The rustlers were hungry and tired and in the right state of mind to be swept by a surprise attack. The fire gave plenty of light.

Bud raised his rifle, selected the face of a boulder some twenty feet from the nearest man, aimed and squeezed the trigger.

Crack!

The glancing bullet made a terrible screech as it ricocheted—enough to shake the strongest nerve.

The rustlers whirled, their hands flashing to their guns, their startled eyes darting about for sight of their attacker.

Bud fired again—and the screech of the recond ricochet galvanized the three into furious action. They turned instantly and dove for the nearest cover.

Two went headlong over the big dead log. The third, doubling low and running like a panicky rabbit, fairly whizzed through the rose bushes to shelter behind the boulders.

Bud tensed and lay straining his ears, his rifle poised. Then came the sounds he had expected.

Snap! A metallic click, followed by a sharp howl of surprise and terror.

Snap! Snap! Similar sounds came from behind the boulders.

Bud arose, and his long legs became a blur as he raced toward the scene. Success—or death—was a matter of seconds now. He must get there before the rustlers recovered from their surprise. As he reached the firelight, he dropped his rifle, and drew his .45.

Two figures reared from beyond the big log, raving and panting. They were tearing at steel things that gripped them. Wolf traps! They had plunged into a nest of them that Bud had placed behind the log. One man had been caught by both forearms, and was helpless. The second was flailing a leg which was weighted with one of the toothed things.

FROM behind the boulders came terrified howls and the thrashing of brush. The third rustler had also stepped into trouble.

"All right, boys," Bud roared. "Stop frettin'. You're covered, an' the sooner you realize it the happier you'll be. Hands up— all of you that can raise yore hands! Hold it, feller!"

This last to the man who was caught only by the ankle. He had been stooping to free himself, which he could have done in a few more seconds, because these traps could be released by muscle power. Now he had straightened and was tensing to draw. But he thought better of it, in the face of Bud's gun. Snarling, he elevated his arms.

The other man, with the pinioned arms, could only howl his rage. The uproar from behind the boulders was suddenly silenced. But Bud backed in that direction and took a quick look. Then he grinned.

A panting figure lay there, dim in the reflection of the fire. He had floundered into a maze of steel bands. In his struggles he had sprung four traps, and both legs and one arm were caught.

After a time Bud had the rustlers lined up and tightly bound with their own saddle ropes. They had suffered nothing more than cuts and bruises, and perhaps

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a few strained ligaments. Their tempers, of course, were badly injured.

Bud regarded them thoughtfully. These men were desperate. Even now they were quietly testing their bonds. To take them the remaining twenty miles to the E Slash E ranch would be as perilous as transporting dynamite. He needed help. He thought of Julius, the old hound. Julius could find his way to the ranch easily.

"I reckon I'll rope you boys to trees for a while," he said. And he moved them back into the shadow where he bound each separately to a pine trunk.

He had barely disappeared to get the dogs when two figures, on foot, came stealing shadowly across the flat. They skirted the tired cattle, and stalked the campfire cautiously, finally gaining a view from a distance of fifty yards. No sound came from the three prisoners in the darkness among the trees, and the new arrivals did not suspect their presence.

"Where's he gone?" Ink Steep whispered.

Muddy Wickwire shook his head. "It's him, all right, though," he replied, his lips barely moving. "See—there's his horses corraled under the trees."

"He must've had them steers staked out here, figurin' you'd refuse to pay him," Steep exulted. "He must be out huntin' firewood. We've shore got him dead to rights."

Bud was returning. He emerged from the darkness leading the two hounds.

The pair watched curiously, biding their time. There was no hurry. They had the unsuspecting young fellow at their mercy, stolen cattle right in his possession.

Wickwire and Steep, upon leaving their ranch, had picked up Bud's trail easily. They had followed it over the foothills and along the rims, never dreaming that it was paralleling the route of their own stolen cattle. At dusk they had lost the trail, but had followed the general direction in which it was pointing until they reached the fork and saw the glow of the campfire across the flats. Then they had dismounted and crept through the brush.

Bud was sitting down by the fire now, writing on a slip of paper he had torn from his pocket notebook. As Wickwire and Steep watched curiously, he bent over one of the dogs, worked with its collar for a moment, then unleashed it.

"Find Sam, Julius," they heard him say. "Home, boy. Get home. Find Sam."

The dog was off like a shot, vanished down the canyon.

Wickwire exposed his ragged teeth in a bleak grin.

"The young fool has sent for his brother," he breathed. "We're lucky. We'll snare 'em both."

BUD replenished the fire. The three bound men among the trees were strangely silent, and Bud knew they were straining at their bonds. He moved over for an inspection.

That gave the pair of stalkers a chance to approach nearer to the camp. They were within ten yards of the fallen tree when Bud's return caused them to sink down in the darkness again.

Bud was hungry. "But I better take in the unsprung traps," he told himself. "I might forget, an' step into one myself."

He climbed atop the log, carefully selected a clear spot beyond, and leaped down. He was stooping to reach for one of the traps, when a harsh, triumphant voice sent a chill through him.

"Gotcha, you danged rustler. Stick 'em up, or we'll shore let starlight through yore carcass."

Bud straightened and slowly lifted his arms. Wickwire and Ink Steep rose from the shadows thirty feet away, their guns covering the surprised cowboy.

"I ought to salt you anyway," Wick-

(Continued on page 94)

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THE DEVIL'S

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Thrilling Cattle-Trail Novelette

By

Ray Nafziger

CHAPTER ONE

Phantom Killer

FROM the burning flanks of the mountains a dry, hot wind swept the Arizona valley. Its scorching breath fanned the faces of the gaunt trail cattle, coated their nostrils with the ashy dust lifted by their dragging hoofs.

Red Toomey's saddle leather squeaked as he topped a hill and looked back at the line of white faces. Two hundred miles these five hundred-odd head had crawled. And it was another hundred to their new

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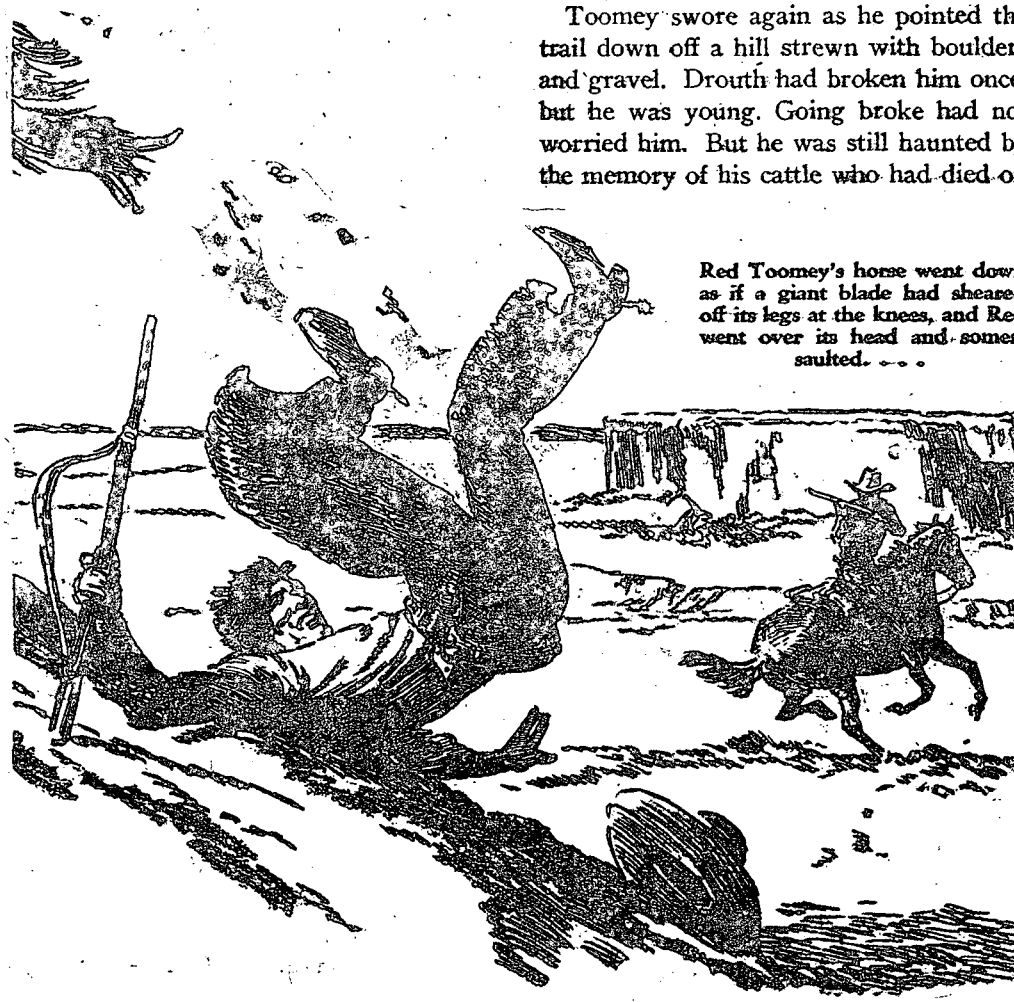
TRAIL DRIVE——

Through the burning desert wastes Red Toomey drove his staggering poverty herd . . . behind him the crude rock pile that marked the grave of his best friend—ahead of him a phantom killer who would never rest until Red's own skull lay bleaching in the merciless sun. . . .

range. A hundred miles of plain hell—Arizona in its driest, hottest month, June.

A low, pitiful bawling that swelled to a moaning chorus came from the leaders. Toomey suddenly cursed. Good Herefords were dying on their feet. A tough break for them and a tough break too for their owner, Bill Wallace, back hazing on the drags. It was hell for Wallace to see starving cattle go down along the line of red backs, to be forced to leave them for the buzzards, in the hope that he might get the rest through to the new range.

Toomey swore again as he pointed the trail down off a hill strewn with boulders and gravel. Drouth had broken him once, but he was young. Going broke had not worried him. But he was still haunted by the memory of his cattle who had died on



Red Toomey's horse went down as if a giant blade had sheared off its legs at the knees, and Red went over its head and somersaulted. . . .

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the grassless flats among the tombstones of bleached white skulls.

Red Toomey was considered to be as hard in his soul as he was in his lean, steel-sinewed body. He had killed in range wars, had done some defensive rustling. Once he would have gone to the penitentiary if it hadn't been for a cattleman whose life he had saved.

As hard as he looked was Toomey, with his thin face and the eyes that had the greenish color of ice—so they said. Yet Red Toomey could not forget his dead cattle, and he hated to see the tortures of Bill Wallace's herd. Nor did he like the whipped look on Wallace's face—Wallace, near fifty, too old to get a start again, and with a wife and four-year-old boy back in the wagon that rolled through drag dust.

It was hell, thought Toomey. No grass up ahead, just an alkali water hole and—

The dead hot air suddenly exploded in the crash of a rifle. A two-second interval was followed by another crash. Then, cutting sharply into the reverberations that hammered against the mountain, came the shrill, high-pitched scream of a woman. The rawboned dun horse under Red Toomey whirled at the touch of spurs, went rocketing past the leaders of the slowly moving herd and over the top of the hill.

BELOW, over the backs of the cattle, he saw the weathered bows of the wagon, partly covered with a gray patch of canvas to give shade for Wallace's sleeping child. Old Stack Givens was spurring toward the wagon, riding from his position on the left flank of the herd. Joe Harley, the remaining member of the crew, was racing his black Indian pony along the other side of the line.

Toomey pounded after them, wondering what had happened. Then he saw. But did not understand.

Bill Wallace's horse, saddle empty, stood beside the trail. Nearby was a patch of color: Emily Wallace, small, bareheaded, was kneeling over her husband who lay in the trail dust. Toomey plummeted down the slope to dismount beside Emily Wallace.

As he looked down, puzzled, Toomey's lean face was like a stone mask with his high cheekbones protruding through tightly drawn skin. Then a flame suddenly lit in his cold eyes. There was a bullet hole in the rancher's temple. Blood had seeped from it, and over the blood a powdery dust was settling. The rancher's blue eyes stared sightlessly at the sky.

Toomey looked inquiringly at old Stack.

"Shots come from yon," said the old puncher with thin lips that hardly moved. His hand jerked back accusingly at the side hill where a ridge mounted in stair-like cliffs to the twisted bare rock of the mountain range.

Toomey raced to the wagon, dragged out his rifle from under the bedrolls. Old Stack Givens ran in, bent on the same errand. Mounted, they thudded up the ridge together, leaving the seventeen-year-old Joe Harley at the wagon.

The pair realized they were easy targets for more shots from the rifle that had killed Wallace, but none came. Clattering up over the rock slope, they saw below them the trough of a canyon, strewn with huge boulders, scarred by deep fissures, its bottom a wilderness of barbed and clawed cactus. All the Indians on San Carlos could have hidden in that Devil's playground. Yet there was no sign of the killer. They had expected none.

"We could likely scout 'round and cut sign on him," suggested Stack.

"Can't stop to take time—even to hunt a killer," said Toomey in a flat voice. "Cows need water. Got to go on. You knew Bill Wallace longer'n me. Any idea o' the way of this?"

"Didn't know he had any enemies," grumbled Stack. "He had the reputation

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back on his home range of never havin' any. Only the rider on that grulla . . . Do yuh reckon . . ."

Toomey had already been thinking of that mysterious grulla horse and his rider. He had been the first to see him, three days before, skylined at sunset for just a short moment before he had disappeared. And two nights before, Toomey and Bill Wallace had caught a glimpse of the same grulla and his rider, flashing into the trees on a slope above them.

REINING around their horses, the two reluctantly turned their backs on the mystery of their boss' death. They had to leave it. On their shoulders had suddenly fallen the responsibility of Bill Wallace's wife and child, and of getting the herd, against heavy odds, to the end of the trail.

At the wagon the four-year-old boy, little Bill Wallace, nicknamed admiringly "Wild Bill," had awakened from his late nap. He had dressed himself, complete to small, high-topped boots—a gift from Toomey—a gaudy neckerchief and gauntlet gloves that came from Joe Harley and Stack Givens. As the two men returned the boy came clambering down over the broad back of the off horse of the wagon team. His mother swept him into her arms, turned a tearless face to the men.

"Don't let him see his dad," she whispered while she muffled the boy's ears in her dress. "He's too young to understand. Let him remember his father as a man—a strong man, alive, speaking. . . ." The woman's breath choked off. "What shall we do?"

"Only one thing to do," said Red Toomey. "Take the herd on as Bill intended. He'd of wanted it. We'll leave you and Wild Bill some place while we take the cattle on—"

"No! No!" she swiftly interrupted him. "I want to help. And, besides, I'm afraid."

Toomey's sharp glance suddenly turned to the woman. The mother of Wild Bill was holding something back. He made a sudden guess.

"You mean that whoever did this—that he might intend more?"

Her eyes filled with terror, terror for the boy she held close to her. But she said not a word. Toomey turned away puzzled and his sharp eyes were drawn to the sun bonnet that lay on the ground by the wagon, flung off when Mrs. Wallace had run to her husband. He stooped to pick it up and examine it. There was a torn place in the fabric, where a bullet had ripped it.

Toomey's mouth was a straight grim line. There had been two shots. One had hit Bill Wallace. The other, fired at his wife, had missed taking her life by a hair's breadth, and Wild Bill had by the same grace escaped being made an orphan.

"If we stayed somewhere, Wild Bill and me, whoever did this would stay behind, too, and he'd have a better chance on some stranger's place than with you men. I'm not scared for myself, but he—he—must be crazy. Maybe he intends to get Wild Bill, too."

Red Toomey considered. "We'll go together then," he agreed. "We'll take the wagon over below that pinnacle and make camp against the wall."

Red leaned over, tilted back the sombrero of the four-year-old boy, saw Bill Wallace's image in the small, grave face and suddenly turned away. There was much to do before night. The cattle to be gotten to the muddy water hole up ahead. Wallace to be buried. The trail herd had to keep moving.

AT TWILIGHT the yellow dirt and rocks spaded from a grudging soil lay in a long pile beside the narrow grave. A giant cane cactus in wine-colored blossom would serve as a headstone for that lonely resting place.

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When Red Toomey and Stack Givens brought the body over, the hush of evening had made a vast cathedral of the valley. Its walls were shadowy mountains; its vault the sky; its windows of stained glass were the pastel afterglows of the Arizona sunset.

There were just the three of them by the grave, Mrs. Wallace, Stack and Red. Joe Harley had stayed at the wagon with little Bill. And here at the end of the trail for Bill Wallace, at the funeral of the greater part of her own life, Emily Wallace, who had been dry-eyed, broke down in pitiful choked sobs. And Toomey and Stack stood by helplessly, eyes averted.

Emily Wallace was in her forties, had lost the fresh prettiness of youth. Pioneer life had etched its lines of toil and hardship, had given her strength. Yet here by the grave of her dead husband she was a woman crushed by grief.

Stack was dabbing a horny hand to his face. Toomey felt a strange warm moisture in his eyes, turned to meet Stack's pleading ones.

"You—can't you say something to help her?" Stack whispered.

Red gave a start. Never in his life had he ever had occasion to comfort anyone; he had never troubled to comfort himself. "Take it and forget it" had been his philosophy of trouble. Now at old Stack's appeal a struggle went on inside of him; perspiration showed on his forehead as he tried to think of something that might lessen this woman's grief.

"Bill," said Red Toomey, looking steadily at the body of the rancher as if he addressed a living man, "I promise—we promise, Stack an' me an' Joe—to see yore family through as if you was here to look after 'em yourself."

He nodded a command at Stack. The old cowboy gently took the arm of the woman, guided her back to the fire. Then Joe Harley came to help Toomey lower the body into the grave, to help him shovel clod and rock down on the boards that had been laid above the blanket-wrapped figure. And darkness found a long, low mound, a rock-topped, man-made heap, that looked not much different from the nature-made ones about it.

CHAPTER TWO

Starvation Drive

AROUND a small fire made of broken stalks of mescal and yucca, with a few sticks of cedar carried in the wagon, they swallowed their meal. Wild Bill prepared for bed.

"Who's goin' to tell me my story?" he demanded. The bright Wild Bill in one respect had a single-track mind: Once told a story, for weeks he insisted that the same story be told over and over until it was fastened firmly in his four-year-old mind. Every night for a month Bill Wallace had been telling and retelling the same yarn to him, and he wanted it again. But they had told the youngster that his father had ridden away.

Toomey looked across at the bent head of the woman. "What story, top-hand?" he asked.

"Jacka Jint Killuh," he said promptly. "An' the skeet bean bush that growed up-pit th' sky."

"Yuh mean the kid that put a notch in his gun for the overgrowed ox that et small boys?" asked old Stack. "Shore, I remember it. Well, sir," the old fellow began droningly, "this here kid he ranched on a sorta run-down cow outfit with his ma and sis. Drought had been hittin' the flats purt' hard an' the water holes was dried up an'—"

"Y' left out somepin'," stated young Bill Wallace indignantly. "This snake-blood jint had up an' drygulched Jackie's dad."

Both Stack and Toomey studied the ground. "Guess I rode by one that was

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hid out in the brush there," Stack admitted gently, and his voice went on.

Toomey picked up his rifle and went out to swing up on his night horse. The worn-out cattle needed no herding, but the camp must be guarded against the return of the killer who rode the grulla horse.

That night and the next Toomey was on watch above the camp, prowling noiselessly, while Stack and Joe Harley unrolled their beds to doze and watch near the wagon. During the slow progress of the day's drive he scouted far ahead and to the side of the herd. On the second morning he saw in the soft dirt of a high ridge the track of a shod horse.

There was no time to halt. The herd had to go on while it was still able to lift its hoofs. And drag on they did, under the withering sun, through the hot drafts from Hell's furnaces, drinking liquid mud, starving on the burned, tough forage.

Ten miles—then a heart-breaking dry drive of twenty to Gila Pass, nothing for a strong herd, but a killer for the Wallace riders' trail-worn cattle.

Then, moving wearily down the canyon slope from the pass, the riders saw the green ribbon of alfalfa fields and cottonwoods, and among these a river.

THAT night the wind freshened, whispered of water and green things. Toomey kicked off his boots, lay on his blanket, with the rifle barrel against his thigh. Near him his night horse cropped grass.

It was past midnight when Toomey came awake suddenly to shove his feet into his boots and to snatch up his rifle. Not far from the wagon lay a long fin of white rock. A blob of shadow blotted out the white of the rock fin, slipped nearer camp.

"Stack! Joe!" Toomey shouted.

His rifle exploded, but he sent the shot high, not daring to try to kill until he knew for certain it was not Stack or Joe. At the shot the figure bounded over the fin and dived into the brush.

Toomey started to pursue afoot, then whirled to slap himself into the saddle of his mount. As he smashed into the brush clump, from up ahead came the sound of a racing horse. Once he had a glimpse of a man riding low over the saddle, but it was too short for an accurate shot. Too-

- The only law he knew was the law of sudden death.
- The only love he had was a love for smoke and lead.
- And yet he would lay down his life for a total stranger whose very existence meant death to this hunted, double-damned—

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mey emptied his gun and raced on reloading it, taking a rocky hillside full of pitfalls as if it were a fast race track.

From up ahead came the loud roar of a rifle, with a bullet that screeched by his head. Death had been cheated by six inches on that shot.

Another shot. Three inches away that time. The rider of the grulla was a marksman. Had to be to kill Bill Wallace at three hundred yards, to put a bullet through the bonnet of a woman sitting on a moving wagon. There was another report.

Toomey's horse went down as if a giant blade had sheared off its legs at the knees. Red went over his head and somersaulted, still gripping his rifle hard. He picked himself up, ran doggedly toward the rim of a side canyon to stand and empty his rifle in the direction of the horse and rider who were plunging through the safe shadows of the slope. The click of rocks grew fainter, finally changed to the dull clump of hoofs loping over a sandy creek bottom.

Dragging his saddle and bridle, Toomey trudged back to camp. "Missed him," he muttered to Stack. "Next time, I git him or he gits me."

"You'll git him," predicted Stack. "It's up to you. Me, I'm no good. My eyes is so far gone I couldn't shoot a elephant if I had a holt of his tail. That hydrophoby wolf ain't done. Bill's family'll never be safe until his clock's stopped."

"If I could only leave the herd and stay on his trail," growled Toomey. "Maybe at the river we can hire a man to take my place. There's a good-sized town down there. Ought to be a bank in it that'll lend Mrs. Wallace a hundred dollars—enough for extry riders and a few days' pasturin' which these cows is shore needin'."

At daylight they were on the move, cattle stepping toward the freshening smell of green things, heads outstretched, pacing with the excessive swaying of tired animals.

Toward noon the riders were guiding the herd down through a lane to miss the town which lay between them and the river. Along the banks of the stream they saw green strips of pasture—just beyond a fence with a big board gate in the middle of it. At the gate waited a group of five riders. On the chests of three of these, silver stars sent back the flash of the sun.

The sheriff, a big man whose paunchy stomach was not far from his saddle horn, rode forward, eyeing the trail herders as if they were escaped convicts.

"Where's yore papers?" he growled, and Toomey brought out the inspection certificates. He looked at them, shoved them back contemptuously. "No good," he said. "They was given in another state. Yuh'll have to git 'em inspected agin here."

Toomey had heard of such grafting dodges. "And how much are we to be held up for more papers?" he asked.

One of the deputies had been riding around the herd making a count. He reported and the sheriff figured on the back of an envelope.

"Two hunderd an' thirteen dollars an' fifty cents—cash—before you go any fu'ther into this county."

"You mean we can't even go into the pasture by the river?"

"Nowheres. They stay right here until you pay that money."

"If you throw off the two hunderd, we might rake up the thirteen dollars and fifty cents," said Toomey. "Otherwise, we'll have to hold up the bank."

"Yuh couldn't even do that—our bank was robbed last fall and had to close down," rasped the sheriff. "Held up the sixteenth of last October by five men who took thirty-three thousand dollars from the vaults."

"And this cow inspection is the way the town aims to git part of that money back,

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is it?" Stack demanded hotly. "Not from us. These cows go on."

"C'mon," said Toomey. "Save yore wind, Stack: You and me'll go read a law book."

THEY left the tortured herd milling near the fence. The wagon had already been driven into the shade of a cottonwood. The herd had done its part; it was now up to its guardians, Red Toomey and Stack Givens.

In town they speedily learned the name of the brainiest lawyer. Five minutes later they had the benefit of the brainiest lawyer's brains. And a little later they were outside the lawyer's office, minus five dollars, in exchange for which they had an opinion that there was no way of crossing this county without the payment of $213.50. The law was very plain.

So were the facts that Bill Wallace had been starved out of his New Mexico range, that he had been killed, leaving to a widow and four-year-old boy a starved, road-weary herd as sole inheritance. These facts of course had nothing to do with the law. Red and Stack both realized that. Yes, indeed.

The two tall, dusty, saddle-warped figures came to a halt on the sidewalk and hostilely eyed the prosperous farming town. Screeching at them from a post six feet away were the reward offers for the five who had held up the local bank. Fifteen hundred dollars, three hundred each for the five masked men who were for the most part vaguely described. Toomey stared at the reward poster thoughtfully.

"S'long," he said finally. "I might look 'round."

Stack watched his trail companion out of the tail of his eye, saw Red head for some strange reason into the office of a weekly newspaper.

"Now what the hell would Red be goin' to git a newspaper for?" Stack profanely asked himself. "We a'ready got a newspaper in the wagon we ain't had time to read through yit."

A side window of the newspaper office was open and old Stack suddenly crossed to it and looked through. Inside was a counter and on it was spread a bound file of papers. Toomey was bent over the file, reading intently. Stack looked over his shoulder and saw the date.

"October twentieth," mused Stack. "And the bank robbery was on the sixteenth. Huh! Ain't he the slick polecat? An' the herd moves on, does it?"

On a nearby pole was stuck another reward notice for the five bank robbers. Stack moved over to read the fine print below the headings. He studied it as intently as Toomey had studied the newspaper.

TWO men entered the sheriff's office a half-hour later, old Stack and the lawyer he and Red Toomey had consulted.

The sheriff's padded carcass creaked back in the padded chair. "If you ain't got the money for them cattle you're only wastin' my time," he spat out.

Stack and the lawyer slid into chairs.

"We're not wasting your time, Snavely," stated the lawyer. "This man wants to spill some talk. Go on."

"Sher'ff," Stack said, "the owner of that Cross-Y herd, Miz Wallace, is up ag'in it. Her new ranch is a'most fifty miles more up the line. As to payin' this inspection fee, she simply can't do it."

"That's no concern o' mine!" barked the sheriff. "I told yuh—"

Old Stack waved him to silence. "Sher'ff, if I was to bring in one of them bank bandits today, would you forgit red tape an' see the reward money went to Miz Wallace right away to let her herd go on? So's they kin move to feed an' water."

The sheriff slowly sat up in his chair, eyes boring into the homely old puncher's. What he saw there convinced him that

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old Stack meant business. "Quit twirlin' yore loop; drop it on somethin'," he ordered. "I reckon yo're meanin' that ice-eyed young red-head compadre of yores? He looked like a bad one to me. Yuh turnin' him in? What's yore proof he took part in this holdup?"

"I hate to do this," went on old Stack, ignoring the questions. "But this li'l woman out there, Bill Wallace's widow, she and Wild Bill and her cows, they got to be sent through. Y'see, I'm explainin' all this so yuh'll believe what I'm goin' to tell yuh."

"Ain't none o' that goin' to help me believe nothin'," snarled the sheriff. "Spill what yuh got to say."

"But this here reward will go to let Miz Wallace's cows past?"

"Yes!" rasped the sheriff harshly. "Go ahead. Gimme yore proof and I'll turn that herd loose an' have this hard guy yanked into a cell 'fore he kin bat his eyes. Was he the leader of that bunch? Looks like the kind that'd be leadin' whatever shenanigans he was in. Spit out yore proof."

"All right," drawled Stack. "Here's the proof." Stack pulled up the sleeve of his shirt, baring his left forearm. And at what he saw there, a bluish-red blur of a flag, the sheriff's jaw dropped. Then his big paw snapped down to his gun. "Put up yore hands!" he roared. "I'm arrestin' yuh for the bank—"

"Hold on!" interrupted the lawyer. "He gave himself up, Snavely. Write a release for those cattle like you promised. I'm seeing that you keep your word. It's worth a lot to you, Snavely, to restore some of the confidence this county lost in a fat sheriff that let the bank be robbed under his nose. Personally I doubted this hombre's story until he told me something else, some other reason why he's doing this that'll remove any doubt you've got. Tell it to the sheriff, Givens."

"Bend down yore ear," said Stack. "This is mighty secret." His voice fell to a whisper.

CHAPTER THREE

Death on the Back Trail

RED TOOMEY, stepping briskly toward the courthouse, met the lawyer just coming out.

"Your partner," the lawyer told him, "gave me a message for you. He's just surrendered for the bank robbery. He had a mark on his arm that proves beyond a doubt that he was in it. During the holdup one of the robbers got his shirt sleeve torn and the cashier saw a tattooed U.S. flag on his left forearm."

Red Toomey gave a start. For a minute he stared unbelievingly at the lawyer. "Yeah, the reward posters told about that flag. But who asked him to show his arm?" he inquired.

"He volunteered. He said that Mrs. Wallace is his daughter, although she doesn't know it. He abandoned her when she was a child and had never seen her again until he hired out for this trail drive. Remorse got to him and he's surrendering himself to give her the means of getting through with the cattle. It's his way of making up."

"A queer story," muttered Toomey. "And a queer coincidence. A damn queer coincidence."

"He said you'd likely be surprised at it," went on the lawyer. "And you're to move the herd out as soon as you can hustle it along. And he also said he'd be with you later, although I don't see how he figures that out—unless he means after he's spent ten or fifteen years behind bars. But he repeated that twice. Lastly, he said he wanted you to be sure to get the grulla ghost, whatever that is."

Toomey stood for a moment turning something over in his mind. Then he swung around and went back to his horse

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and left town, leading Stack's mount behind him.

* * *

A day later the herd was winding up out of the river bottom, with two new hands helping Harley and Toomey. Toomey, watching for the grulla rider, rode ahead of the wagon, rifle over his saddle horn, his eyes never still. Ahead lay canyons with high rock walls, cliffs, huge tumbled fragments of stone—a million places for ambush. He did not like the prospect of passing through them if the grulla ghost was about.

That night Wild Bill ate his supper, hitched up his chaps as he had often seen Toomey do.

"Stack ain't here. Dad ain't here," he said. "Who's goin' to tell me erbout this 'ere Jacka Jint Killuh?"

Toomey knelt on one knee, seated the boy on the other one. "It was thisaway," he began. "There was oncet a button lived with his ma on a outfit near the Kiyipoo Injun Reservation. This 'ere button he looked after his ma and the rancho, bustin' hisself out a bronc occasional so's to keep his string o' salty cow horses built up. Then one mornin' his ma said—"

"Whoa!" said Wild Bill Wallace. "You left it out about his dad. It starts out how a ornery snake-blooded jint had dry-gulched his dad."

"Yeah, I did leave that out," admitted Toomey. "I was too anxious I reckon to git to this giant—the big savage-lookin' devil. This elephant was eighteen axe handles high and a plug o' chewin' tobacker wide between the eyes an' tall as six hundred-year-old jack pines stuck end to end. He rode a hoss and it was shore a big one. When this hoss rolled in his corral after a hard day's ride, he left a canyon like this one ahead of us."

"What color was this hoss?" asked Wild Bill.

"It was a grulla," put in Emily Wallace. "Grulla. The same color of horse I saw tonight—just before dark."

"Yuh saw him, ma'am, did yuh?" asked Toomey softly. He went on with his story, but his mind was not on the yarn.

The next morning he moved the wagon and herd to the safety of a wide flat. It was the first time since the murder of Bill Wallace that the feed was good enough to rest the cattle for a few days. Leaving the men with strict orders to be on guard day and night and to stay until he returned, Toomey got on his horse and back-tracked a few miles to the spot where Mrs. Wallace had seen the rider. Cutting the trail, he identified the tracks as those of the grulla, and thereafter clung to them as a starving wolf follows a deer.

First, however, he dismounted and turned loose his horse, after tying a short note to the horn and heading him back to the herd. A horse could be used for trailing most wild animals, but not one with power to kill at three hundred yards. Toomey set out, walking cautiously, always with his rifle in his hands, eyes photographing every inch of the country around him.

THE AFTERNOON wore away and evening fell, with Toomey still on the trail. As moonlight flooded the canyon, he caught the odor of smoke, carried down to him by the evening breeze. Toomey redoubled his caution and came to the edge of a clearing where a deserted cabin stood. From the chimney of the house with its sagging door and paneless windows, smoke drifted in a pale, thin column. Evidently an old fireplace had been used by the killer to cook his supper. At this moment the man might be inside sleeping or, knowing he was followed, he might be watching for his pursuer, with the smoke as a trap.

Great white blotches of moonlight lay between Toomey and the open door. To

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cross the yard meant chancing a shot. To keep watch until daylight was safer, but Toomey was done with waiting. Boldly gambling his entire stack, with the hammer of his rifle back, he stepped out into the clearing. Every sense was on the alert to catch the slightest movement at the windows or door, to hear the faintest sound.

A loud, jeering yell came as flame spurted from the killer's gun. Toomey flung himself to the ground and felt the wind of the bullet over him. As he raised his own rifle barrel to fire, the second shot came to smash through his sombrero and slash along his head with the force of a kicking mule, stunning him into momentary helplessness.

"Not done for yit, hey?" the killer croaked. He was tall, even for range country, of a whipstock hardness, heavily bearded. He put down his rifle and something bright gleamed below his hand—the steel blade of a knife.

"Tryin' to foller Looney Matt, was yuh?" he asked, with a high-pitched foolish chuckle. "You never was slick enough fer that. I'm a-goin' to carve out yore heart and cook it. An' then I'll finish 'em at the wagon—woman an' kid both. Ain't no trail driver goin' to steal Looney Matt's wife and boy."

The man was insane—as crazy as a rabid wolf—his laugh was enough to tell that. Toomey realized he hung on the brink of death's pit, but he had no more power over his movements than one has in a dream. In vain he sought to jerk his paralyzed muscles back into control. But while the man and the steel blade of the knife advanced, he could not move. He was like a spectator watching his own death.

When the killer attacked it was with the leap of a savage beast. In the last second of time given him, Toomey was able to move just enough to let the knife slit the sleeve of his arm instead of driving through his chest. And before the knife could be lifted again, he managed to grip the other's wrist.

For a minute the bodies of the two men thrashed about on the ground. Toomey had heard that maniacs had the strength of three men; this one had the strength of at least two. Still dazed from the shot that had scraped his scalp, Toomey could do little more than cling desperately to the bony wrist of the knife hand.

FOR long seconds their bodies strained against each other. And then, grunting savagely, the killer in a raging fury lifted himself to his knees and flung himself on top of Toomey. As he came down, the knife, held by his own and Toomey's hands, slipped and slid quietly through the killer's shirt front, penetrated his heart.

Warm blood gushed out over Toomey as he rolled away. Standing shakily on his feet, he looked at the man in the moonlight. He had heard many yarns of an outlaw called Looney Matt who had belonged to various gangs. It was said he had gone mad from grief over the loss of his wife and child, who had disappeared years before with a trail herd foreman. Despite his feeble wits he had been useful to an outlaw gang because he obeyed orders, was a dead shot and had no sense of fear, while his childishness allowed his pals to cheat him on his share of the proceeds. In his crazed brain he must have thought the Wallaces with their trail herd were his renegade wife and foreman.

The sleeves of the man's shirt had been torn during the struggle and the cloth had fallen away from the arms. What he saw on the left forearm made Toomey suddenly stoop for a closer examination. Afterward he hunted the grulla. He found him tied to a manzanita across the clearing.

Several hours later Toomey rode into the trail camp, leading the grulla horse

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with the body tied to it. He had just dismounted when out of the darkness came a familiar hail and up rode old Stack Givens.

"You got out of that jail?" Toomey asked, startled.

Stack chuckled. "Shore. I jist give myself up; I didn't promise I'd stay there. It's too late for 'em to stop the herd now. I jist dropped in to say *Adios* to Wild Bill, then I'll be off agin. I didn't do nothin' to git loose except slip a jailer's gun outa his holster. How 'bout the grulla ghost?"

"Dead," said Toomey. "Brung him in. He was plumb loco."

"Knowed all the time yuh'd git him," said Stack.

"Yuh knowed more'n I did," admitted Toomey. "An' so you're Mrs. Wallace's father, are you?"

"Nope," said Stack. "I ain't. I jist added that to make my story a leetle stronger."

"But I guess you really were in that bandit bunch, eh?" persisted Toomey. "How come you got that flag tattoo on yore arm? I don't remember ever seein' it there."

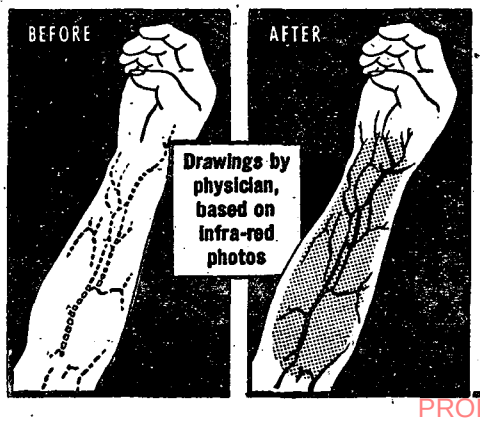
"Jist a thing yore eyes happened to miss," maintained Stack carelessly.

"Stack," said Red Toomey sternly, "you can lie faster and more convincin' than anybody I ever met. You lied a sheriff into turnin' loose the herd and you no doubt lied a jailer into givin' yuh a chance to grab his gun. And now you a'most talk me into believin' yuh. A'most, but not quite. Come acrost. How come yuh growed that tattoo so quick?"

"In my younger days I oncet took up paintin'," said Stack. "Hosses, cowboys an' cows mostly. Yessir, I slung a paint brush quite a while before I found out a rope was more suited fer a ignerant cuss like me. When I saw you studyin' the paper for details of the bank robbery, aimin' to give yoreself up as one of the bandits I decided to beat yuh to it. A cheap outfit of paints in a store, five minutes of work, and I had a flag on my arm could pass as a tattoo with these hicks—until they examined it close, anyway. Which they didn't. But what yuh leadin' up to? What made yuh think that flag was fake?"

Toomey's hand slapped down hard on old Stack's shoulder. "You old son of a gun," he said affectionately, "go over and take a look at that grulla rider. He's got a U. S. flag on his arm below the elbow. I kinda think he was in that robbery. Better take his body in tomorrow and explain to the sheriff that you made a mistake in givin' yoreself up. Then yuh hustle back up to these cows ag'in. I ain't in yore class when it comes to spinnin' yarns for Wild Bill."

THE END



HOW SLOAN'S LINIMENT AIDS MUSCULAR PAINS

Here's vital news for sufferers from muscular aches and rheumatic pains. Using infra-red rays, scientists have now succeeded in photographing blood-vessels *below the skin-surface*. These photos (see pictures at left) prove that, after an application of Sloan's Liniment, the veins *expand* . . . evidence that the treated area gets *extra* supplies of blood, to revitalize tissues and wash away waste matter and poisons faster.

When you use Sloan's Liniment, you *know* that it is increasing the all-important flow of blood to the treated area, and that this effect *extends below the skin-surface*. No wonder Sloan's helps to bring blessed relief from rheumatic aches, arthritis pains, lumbago, sore muscles. Sloan's has been called "the greatest name in pain-relieving liniments." Get a bottle today.

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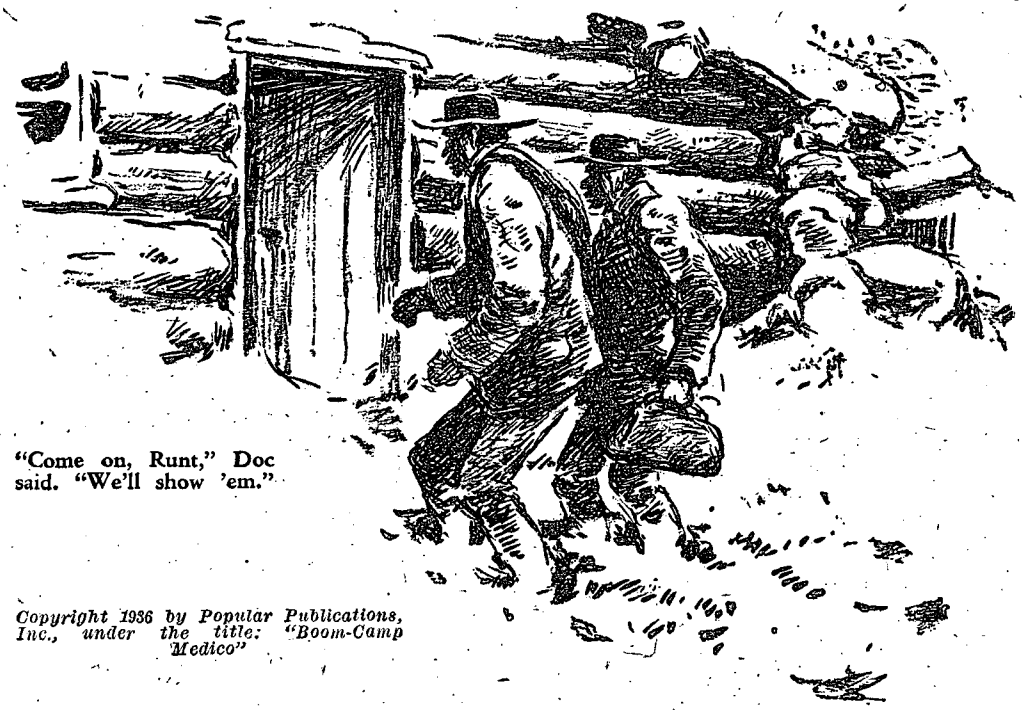

"Come on, Runt," Doc said. "We'll show 'em."

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Half-Pint Hero

A Western Short Short by Dennison Rust

Scared little Hardpan Sykes worshiped tough Doc Parmenter. But, as Hardpan demonstrated, it takes more than muscle to make a fighting man!

IT WAS after that epic battle in the Comet saloon, where Doc Parmenter, swaggering bully of Feather Creek Camp, once and for all established his renegade leadership against the gun-swinging bunch of tinhorns and riff-raff, that little Hardpan Sykes came in through the swinging doors. Doc, wounded, was leaning against the bar, a snarl of victory on his bearded lips.

Little Hardpan looked up with admiration. "My!" he breathed. "That was shore fine, Doc. You licked 'em—all alone! That was great!"

Doc looked at the worshiping Hardpan. "Where in hell was you when the fightin' was goin' on? What's the matter—yuh yelluh? Didn't yuh ever swing a gun? Didn't yuh ever beef a man?"

"I—I guess I just ain't got that kind of guts," Hardpan admitted sadly.

"*That* kind of guts!" Doc roared. "Hell—you mean you ain't got *any* kind of guts! Now, wipe up these would-be gunfighters off'n the floor!"

But there were times, too, when Hardpan's admiration was not all for his big mentor's gunplay and fighting nerve. Times when, in stolen hours, he carefully took down those big volumes in Doc's ne-

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glected office and pored through them. To be someone like Doc—versed in the use of scalpel and knife and medicine, and yet one who could run a tough camp like Feather Creek single-handed . . . Hardpan sighed. . . . . .

There came the day when a masked committee of stern-faced citizens called on Doc. He had two hours to get out, and not come back.

Doc got out in a whipping blizzard, starting on foot for the thirty-mile trek over Big Squaw Pass to the next camp, Dunston. After the first few slogging miles, Doc rested, and then he was not surprised to see Hardpan catching up with him. "Be all right to break the trail and rustle grub," thought Doc. "If he dies on the way, what the hell . . . ?"

But Hardpan didn't die on the way. There was something in that battle with the storm that seemed to make a new man of the meek little ex-miner.

At last, after two days, they staggered into the outskirts of Dunston. Weakly, the two renegades entered the nearest cabin, which stood, dark, deserted appearing, its door swinging to the winter's wind.

"Strike a light, Runt," Doc growled. "Then git a fire goin'."

He stopped at a moan from the dark part of the cabin.

"Doc—Doc Parmenter. Thought I recognized that voice. Thank God you've come, Doc! We—we're nearly wiped out from diphtheria. . . ."

Doc's face went white under his beard. "Diphtheria! You—you made a bad mistake. Me, I ain't Doc Parmenter. I don't know nothin' about diphtheria—except it's plumb poison to a man who wants to live. I'm leavin'!"

"No you ain't, Doc!" Hardpan's voice snarled in his ear.

Doc whirled, to feel the muzzle of his own gun jam into his stomach.

"I been readin' yore books," came Hardpan's voice. "I brought some of the medicine we might have needed along in my pack. Git goin', Doc, or I'll blow you plumb to hell an' do the job alone!"

DOC PARMENTER felt for a moment a sense of shame that he hadn't felt in years; and that sense of shame was the first sign of a new manhood that was springing to life in him.

"Come on, Runt," Doc said. "We'll show 'em!"

They did. But folks back in Feather Creek could never understand why Dunston ever put up with that worthless gun-swaggering bully who called himself Doc Parmenter. Because, after kicking him out of camp, they'd found out that he wasn't a real doc at all—he'd just packed those tools and medicine into camp to use as a respectable front for his hell-raising. Likely, they figured, he didn't even know what the medicine was for; likely he'd never even glanced inside one of the big books that he'd kept, dusty and covered with cob-webs, in that little room he'd called his office. . . .

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On One Black Night

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It was a face from hell that Jim Randle looked on. The face of Buck Earp. . . .

By

Foster-Harris

On a vicious black night of wind and rain they faced each other, those two sons of feudist clans, a hundred years of hate driving them on to one nightmare minute of gunflame. . . .

IT WAS a derrick-floor gabfest, and the talk slid lazily from bonanza gushers to that old, red saga of the petroleum country, the tale of Rolling Joe Ryan, who waited thirty years for his vengeance and got it one bleak day when he walked up to his enemy, slammed down

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on the floor a quart of nitroglycerin and blew his foe, and himself as well, to atoms!

For three weeks I had been sitting out there, watching that wildcat test pound endlessly down. Nothing happening, nothing expected to happen for at least several hundred feet more. It was thirty-seven miles from the nearest town, out in the infinite desolation of the country west of the Pecos.

That day the wind drove liquid ice, straight from the Pole, through the derrick. But the floor was snugly boarded in and a stove made out of an old oil drum glowed in one corner. It was warm and comfortable, and Mike Carmichael, the driller, was just finishing the old story of Rolling Joe.

As he ended, Sunny Randle, his big, young tool-dresser, shifted around on the bench beside the stove and started to talk. Ordinarily silent as a statue, this is the only story I ever knew him to tell.

I KNEW a man who was willing to die, just so he got to blast the life out of the man he hated. And the guy he hated was one of my kin.

Probably you never heard tell of it, but there was a time once when revenge was pretty near the main business of my family. Up in Missouri and the Osage country in Oklahoma they'll still tell you plenty about the Earp-Randle feud and how bloody it was.

What started it nobody remembers and it don't matter anyway, but for two generations Randles killed Earps and Earps killed Randles, with every now and then, of course, the law stepping in and hanging somebody, one side or the other.

But when Big Jim Randle, one of the men I'm telling you about, was around eighteen, the feud had just about petered out and gone to sleep. Tired of killings and hangings, maybe, both sides was letting things lay. But they hadn't forgiven and forgot, not much! Inside they still hated each other worse than poison.

The other man was one of the Earps, a wild, young fellow, name of Soniel, a family name, although everybody generally called him Buck. He was just Big Jim's age. Both families was in the Osage Hills country, then, the Earps farming leased Indian land and the Randles mostly working in the little oilfields that had just started being developed.

There was another white family in the neighborhood, an old Texas cowman and his wife, name of Davis. They had just one child, a daughter, Margaret. She was about sixteen and a beauty, the prettiest girl in the Osage, so they say. And—yeah, you guessed it. The first things folks knew both Jim Randle and Buck Earp were hanging around the Davis place, bitter rivals.

Well, that alone was enough to cause trouble. There's been plenty of fights and even killings over nothing more than just two guys both wanting the same girl. But when you add to that the fact that one of these guys was a Randle and the other an Earp—two guys who already hated each other and whose folks had hated and killed for years—you can see what a chance for real high-explosive trouble there was.

The old frontier gunplay days were just about gone. Civilization was coming in; they were talking about statehood and railroads and schools. As yet none of the really big oil booms had come along to teach 'em the oil country's own, new brand of super-hellishness. It was a different order of things and dimly, I reckon, both men felt it.

If the girl had just definitely favored one guy or the other right at the start, probably nothing much would have happened. But she didn't. She seemed to like them both equally well. The affair kept getting tighter and tighter until finally Big Jim Randle captured the inside track. And the trouble came.

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NOW the thing the Davises had most against Buck Earp was that he was a little inclined to be wild. He seemed to like to hell around with a tough bunch who were sort of hangovers from the times the Indian country was paradise for all the outlaws and gunmen in the Southwest. They'd gave him a kind of bad reputation. And they were the ones too who were going to prove his ruin.

The day after Margaret Davis definitely had thrown down Buck Earp for Big Jim Randle, the two men just happened to meet on the road. Neither one was packing a gun, but Buck was a little drunk and one of his tough friends was along to sort of egg him on. There was a fist-and-skull fight that probably was a lulu, both of them being big men, around a hundred and eighty-ninety pounds.

And Big Jim Randle won.

His nose broken, his face beat to a bloody pulp, Buck Earp picked himself off the ground and looked at Big Jim, out of eyes that were black pits of fury. Three generations of piled-up hate looked out of those eyes. He lifted a bloody hand.

"The next time I see you, Jim Randle," he said in a voice like the slash of a knife, "you better have yore pistol handy. One of us ain't goin' to live."

"I'll be ready for yuh, Buck Earp," Big Jim told him, never raising his voice.

It was just about a week. Margaret Davis, of course, had told Buck Earp that he mustn't come back, and he was taking it hard. Probably those friends of his were egging him on, too. It was Saturday and Big Jim, who was working on a drilling well, had to come to town. The word reached him that Buck Earp was in town waiting for him.

Now he couldn't just stay away and avoid Buck Earp. It was kind of a matter of honor, you understand. He knew Buck was a considerable faster hand with a gun than he was and that Buck would probably kill him. But he had to go.

Big Jim Randle started to town. But before he got there, something happened.

Buck Earp and one of those shadowy friends of his, a man going then under the name of Bitter Creek, had been having two or three drinks in town. Wasn't supposed to be any liquor in the Indian country, of course—federal law against it. But just the same you could get liquor if you wanted it bad enough. Maybe they'd had a little too much. And Buck Earp's nerves, anyway, you'll remember, under the circumstances must have been on a hair-trigger edge.

They swaggered out of the whisky seller's into the street. A man walked up, threw back his coat with his left hand to show the badge on his vest, made a move with his right hand at the same time toward his pocket. Maybe he was reaching for handcuffs while he said, "All right, you! I've got a—"

He never finished the sentence. He was a deputy United States marshal, a raw, new one or he'd never have made such a fool play. The guy he was really trying to arrest was Bitter Creek, a hard hombre, wanted for mail robbery and a murder or two. And whether he was meaning to include Buck Earp too, on suspicion or something, nobody'll ever know.

BITTER CREEK, a step behind Buck Earp, went for his gun, and he went lightning fast. The marshal, dead game even if he was plenty young and foolish, lashed down for his Colt, too. And Buck Earp, facing him, naturally mistook the gesture as meant for him.

Like a streak of blurred light his hand whipped the hogleg Colt out of his breeches. There was the roar of a shot. The marshal's gun flamed, but its bullet tore into the ground as Bitter Creek's slug smashed through his arm. And Buck Earp was shooting.

A big man with a Winchester, shooting from the hip as he came, all of a sudden

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burst out from nowhere, charging across the street. Another big guy was shooting from a store door. The young marshal was down on his face, dead. Bitter Creek was down. Firing right and left, young Buck Earp made a wild jump for the narrow space between two store buildings just behind him. He made it and popped out of sight, sprinting like mad toward the back.

His horse was hitched in front of a feed store which was off the main street of the town on a sort of side road. Running as fast as he could, Buck Earp went by the back of these stores and came out into this side road, heading toward his horse.

And right there the old red gods played him their second mean trick. For he saw ahead of him, riding up that road toward town, Big Jim Randle!

A lead slug whistled over Big Jim's head and his horse rared back on its haunches. He never had time to see that slug wasn't meant for him and anyway had been fired from a Winchester, not a pistol. All he could see was Buck Earp popping into the road with a smoking Colt in his hand, charging straight at him.

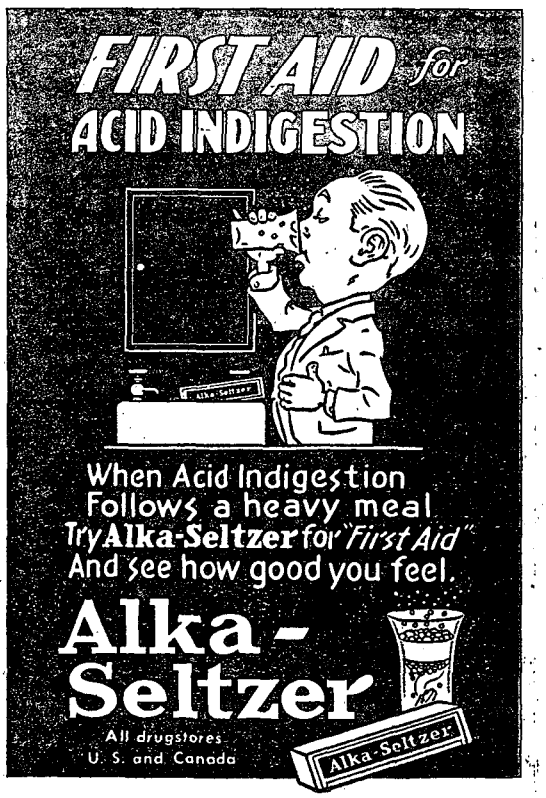
Big Jim slashed out his pistol and fired. His horse was bucking and the bullet almost went wild. But not quite. It took Buck Earp along the side of the head, and for him it was lights out.

When he come to he was lying on the floor of the feed store and one of those big gunmen, the one who had worked the Winchester, was kneeling beside him, a grim look on his face. There was a badge on his vest too—a U.S. deputy marshal's. There'd been three of those marshals come into town and they'd separated, kind of looking the land over, when the youngest one made his final mistake by getting in the line of Buck Earp's bullets.

Now Buck Earp was face to face with the gallows, for murder. Because that young deputy had showed his badge first, you remember, and there wasn't any doubt but what Buck had seen it. Caught in company with a known mail robber and killer outlaw, Buck had drawed on the law. He'd tried to get away and only his bitterest enemy, the man he was waiting in town to kill, had halted him.

Buck didn't help himself any by what he did as he lay there. Maybe that slug across the head really had knocked him, for the time, just a little crazy. He cursed the officers until he was black in the face. Then, all of a sudden, he broke off and reared himself up to a sitting position.

Big Jim Randle was in the crowd looking at him. When Buck Earp had leaped out into the street, charging at him, Big Jim had shot him because he really thought Earp was shooting at him, trying to kill him. Whether he'd have shot Earp anyway had he realized what actually was happening I don't know and it don't matter now anyway. He had shot Buck Earp, stopped him, that was all that mattered.



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WHEN Buck Earp reared himself up they say there was actually froth on his mouth, like you see on the jaws of a mad dog. "Jim Randle," he said, "I'm goin' to kill you. I'm goin' to kill you for that if I have to come back to do it from the bottom of hell."

"I'll be ready for yuh, Buck Earp," said Big Jim again, still in that quiet, even voice.

Well, they took Buck Earp away to the United States court of the Indian Territory, at Muskogee. They brought him to trial and the circumstances testified to was such that they didn't hang him. Instead they gave him forty years at hard labor in the Federal penitentiary.

Big Jim Randle was there at the trial, as a witness. As they led Buck Earp out he stopped a minute and looked at Big Jim, not saying a word. Some folks say Buck had been told Jim actually had sicced those officers on him. Maybe Buck had been told that; maybe he believed it. He never said a word. But Big Jim Randle could see in his eyes that he meant to keep that promise, to come back and try to kill, even if it meant coming from the very bottom of hell.

About three months later Jim Randle and Margaret got married. Time kept rolling on, changes coming, things happening. The big Glenn pool was brought in, the first really big-time oilfield Oklahoma had; next year came statehood, and always the oil play kept spreading out. New fields coming in, getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

Big Jim was sticking with the game, making a good living, not getting rich by any means, but still doing pretty well. Then he had a fall from a derrick, broke himself up pretty bad and although he recovered quick, for a while he wasn't as strong as he'd been before. While he was getting his strength back, he found himself a job as a pumper and farm boss on a little lease back up in the Osage hills, the country where he'd started out.

There were just three little wells on this lease and it was about eight or nine miles north of Blend, a little one-horse oil town. Cattle running in the blackjack-covered hills all around the lease and no neighbors you could depend on any nearer than town.

They'd never got but these three wells out there and the work wasn't hard. There was just Big Jim and his wife and another pumper on the lease, seeing that the power kept running and the oil kept pouring into the tanks. About once a week the pipe-line guy would come out to gauge the tanks and run the oil into the line, and maybe once a week Jim and his wife would go into town.

They'd not had any children yet and they were both anxious to have some. So when Margaret told Big Jim some mighty interesting news I reckon they were just about as happy as folks can be. Jim had almost forgot about Buck Earp and his threat.

IT CAME on winter. It snowed and the snow melted and then before the ground could dry it set in to rain and it looked like the rain never was going to let up. The roads turned into just bottomless mud holes. Everything was tied up with the wagons. Even the buggies and light surreys stuck the minute they got out of the yard. The only way you could get around was either on foot or horseback.

That Friday afternoon the other pumper took a horse and went to town, promising to come back before dark. But he didn't come, and at daybreak Saturday he still hadn't come. Big Jim, knowing him pretty well, knew he must be on a drunk again and liable not to come back for a week.

Jim naturally couldn't keep the lease running day and night all by himself. He just had to get himself another pumper. And to help him make up his mind, along

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about noon one of his powers went wrong. Some little jigger got busted and he didn't have another one on hand, so he had to shut it down.

It was just up to him to go into town and get him another man and that piece he needed. It was raining cats and dogs and he was sort of fearful about leaving Margaret all alone in her condition, but there'd been an Indian woman coming over every day to help around the house and she ought to be there soon. And, anyway, the kid wasn't expected for two weeks yet. So he caught up a horse, kissed his wife good-bye and took out.

He was held up in town a good deal longer than he'd expected. The best he could do was get a promise from a new pumper to be out early next day. He found his old pumper dead drunk, just as he had expected.

Just what made him do it he never could say, but he borrowed a gun from one of his friends, just before starting out, and stuck it inside his shirt. His own .45 he'd left with his wife, just in case, never even dreaming she'd have any reason to need it, you understand. The rain had stopped along about sunset; the sky had partly cleared. There was banks of thick, clammy mist hanging in the thickets and low spots, and now and then a little patch of cold, frosty moonlight when he started home.

It was cold. The raw, damp kind of cold that goes right through you, no matter what you're wearing.

Going his best gait on that gosh-awful road, because he was getting worried about Margaret, what with him staying away so much longer than he'd said he would, he came to within about a mile and a half of the lease. The trees here were tall, thick and right up against the road on both sides, making it black as ink, with just a little break here and there.

All of a sudden the tired horse throwed up his head, snorted, shied back—and there, in a little patch of moonlight just ahead was the figure of a man.

WAVERY fingers of mist lay across that road and there was the cold, glassy reflection from pools of water in the ditches. The figure was half in pitblack shadow, but thin moonlight was on its head and Big Jim Randle could see the face.

It was a face from hell. The face of Buck Earp.

"Well, Randle," Big Jim could just hear Earp's harsh, whispering voice, "I come back like I promised. To kill—"

In the black below that devil's face Big Jim saw something jerk. A sixgun trained pointblank on his heart. He knew he had one split second, and no more.

He acted fast. He flung himself to the side and down, his hand streaking for his own gun. The scared horse rared up; there was the flash and roar of Buck Earp's gun and the bullet hit the horse.

There was the heavy splash of Jim's body hitting the water-soaked ground. The horse was floundering crazily away, and there in the darkness Buck Earp was certain he saw Big Jim, trying to get to his feet. He cut loose again, emptying his gun as Big Jim's shadow reeled back. He heard Big Jim give a sobbing, gasping cry and then his shadow was gone.

Jamming cartridges into his gun as fast as his fingers would work, Buck Earp ran forward. He was certain he'd hit Randle, certain he'd killed him. But Jim Randle's body wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Crouching there, glaring about him, Buck Earp took another step, and felt something under his foot. He bent quick, picking it up, holding it close to his eyes. Too dark to see, but his fingers told him what it was. It was a pistol, Jim Randle's pistol, and there was something warm, sticky, wet all over it. Blood.

He'd hit Big Jim Randle, then, hit him

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bad enough to make him drop his pistol and flounder to the ground. Disarmed and badly hit, maybe dead. Like the wolf he was, Buck Earp started again looking for his prey.

He couldn't find him. Baffled, he even fumbled in his pockets, found one match and struck it, tried to figure out the tracks. There was Jim's staggering footprints in the mud leading to an old, rotten chunk of log laying half in, half out of the water-filled ditch beside the road. There was blood on that log, too. And there was blood on the thick, wet mess of leaves carpeting the ground on the other side of the ditch. The black thicket was just a step farther.

Big Jim Randle had still managed to run into the thicket; that was obvious. In there, Earp hadn't a chance in the world to find him, account the wet leaves on the ground would muffle Jim's steps and it was black as the soot of hell's chimney.

Big Jim would most probably try to get home. It was eight miles back to town, the road hip deep with mud—a wounded man wouldn't even think of trying that. Yes, he'd go home if he could.

So Buck Earp faded back into the dark, heading for Randle's house on the lease, as fast as he could go.

HE WAS gambling with fate now and he knew it. He'd busted out of the penitentiary, but they'd figured which way he'd head and they were hot on his heels. He'd got to the lease just in time to see Big Jim riding off, too far away for him to do anything. So all afternoon he'd been hiding in the thickets, watching, waiting. About dusk an Indian had come riding through the woods, and Buck was pretty certain that the Indian had seen him and recognized him. If so, it was just a question of time till these woods would be red hot with man-hunters.

But since he'd already risked everything to break out and find Jim Randle, Buck was willing to die, just so he killed the man he hated.

Like a shadow in the darkness, Buck Earp came to the lease, sliding from tree to tree toward the little house where the light showed in the windows.

And then, all of a sudden, Buck Earp straightened up, stiff and tense. From inside that little house a sound had reached him, the moaning, sobbing cry of a woman in deadly pain. As he listened, it came again and again.

He was running toward the house, all thoughts of why he'd come there for the moment forgotten. That moaning cry come out to him again, a woman in terrible fear or agony. With his pistol up and ready, he threw himself across the porch and tore open the door.

It took him just one look to see what was the matter. Sort of gasping, he hung to the door jamb a minute, glaring into the room, looking wildly back over his shoulder for the help he knew couldn't possibly be there. The woman cried out again, a low sobbing moan.

Margaret Randle had been in labor for hours. The Indian woman hadn't come. There wasn't a moment to be lost and Buck Earp knew it.

Probably he'd never officiated in any such case before, but he knew what to do. Every grown man in the Old West did. With doctors scarce and far away and with folks living so few and far apart, a man just had to know what to do in such-like emergencies.

He pitched in. As fast as he could, he built a fire in the stone-cold stove. He took off his coat, slipping the gun out of his breeches band so Margaret Randle wouldn't see it. He dropped the weapon in a coat pocket and threw the coat aside. Rolling up his sleeves, he got a big pan of water heating.

Margaret Randle was too far gone to recognize him. But, dimly, she knew that

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somebody was there, somebody who knew what to do and was doing it. Helping her, talking to her in a soft, soothing voice, holding her hands gentle-like when the tearing pains seemed too much.

Man, it sure makes you wonder what Buck Earp thought, don't it? Stepping right in from trying his grim damnedest to murder Jim Randle to helping bring Jim Randle's son into the world. Buck doing that, knowing that every minute was bringing the man-hunters closer and closer.

And then Buck Earp was just too busy to think. Doing his best, fighting hard for a mother and child—a woman who had turned him down and married his bitterest rival; a baby, the son of the man he hated worst of all on earth.

Maybe it was an hour, maybe more. Suddenly Buck was holding a red, fat, helpless mite by the heels, slapping him on the back, making him give his first cry. A thin, wailing cry of a new baby helped into the world—by an outlawed killer.

Minutes ticked by, time that Buck Earp was just too busy to even know was passing. Margaret Randle was sleeping, covered up snug, worn out. Buck Earp was at the table, working. He never heard the door open, never even raised his head until the cold air slapped against his face.

THEN he jerked his head up. Big Jim Randle was there in the door. Wet and cold as a drowned rat, a bullet slash across the side of his head, mud and blood streaked across his face. Big Jim stood there in the doorway, staring. A shotgun was leaning against the door jamb, right beside his hand; and Buck Earp's coat with his gun in it lay clear across the room.

"Shut that door, damn yuh!" Buck Earp said in a quick, fierce whisper. "Yuh want this kid to catch pneumonia?"

Jim Randle came in, closing the door. He'd been hit twice by Buck Earp's bullets, once in the side, once in the head, but neither wound was much more than a bad scratch. That head wound had knocked him out, and he'd dropped unconscious into the ditch under that log. Buck Earp had stood right over him and hadn't seen him. He'd laid there no telling how long before coming to.

He never made a move toward that shotgun. Somehow he knew he didn't need to. Blue with cold, he was, but not noticing it now. He came slowly over to the table where Buck Earp had the baby on a soft folded quilt, just halfway through greasing him with lard.

He looked at his wife, sleeping peaceful, and then he looked at Buck Earp. Buck Earp wasn't even looking at him. Buck was finishing taking care of the baby, his big rough hands as gentle and careful as a mother's. His cropped hair was white now and grizzled; his face looked twenty years older than it had when Jim had last seen him.

The baby's bit of a hand closed over one of Buck's fingers. With the oddest expression on his face he lifted his head, looked at Big Jim and a little of that hard defiance came back into his eyes.

"Jim Randle, I don't know how come I didn't kill yuh," he said. "Now I—I'm glad I didn't. But, damn yuh, I'm getting back at yuh one way, anyway. I've done named this baby—after me." And it looked like he smiled.

Jim Randle started to answer. There come a muffled shout from outside and then the sound of horses' feet in the mud. Big Jim half turned.

Buck Earp had wrapped the baby up, whirled and was jumping for his coat before Jim could draw a breath. "Answer that!" he snapped at Jim in a quick, fierce whisper. "I know who it is. Give me one minute. Go out there and talk to 'em. I can't start trouble in here. But I'll not be took alive!"

(Continued on page 97)

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Drew's gun barrel gleamed in the sun, and his gun roared twice. . . .

God Help That

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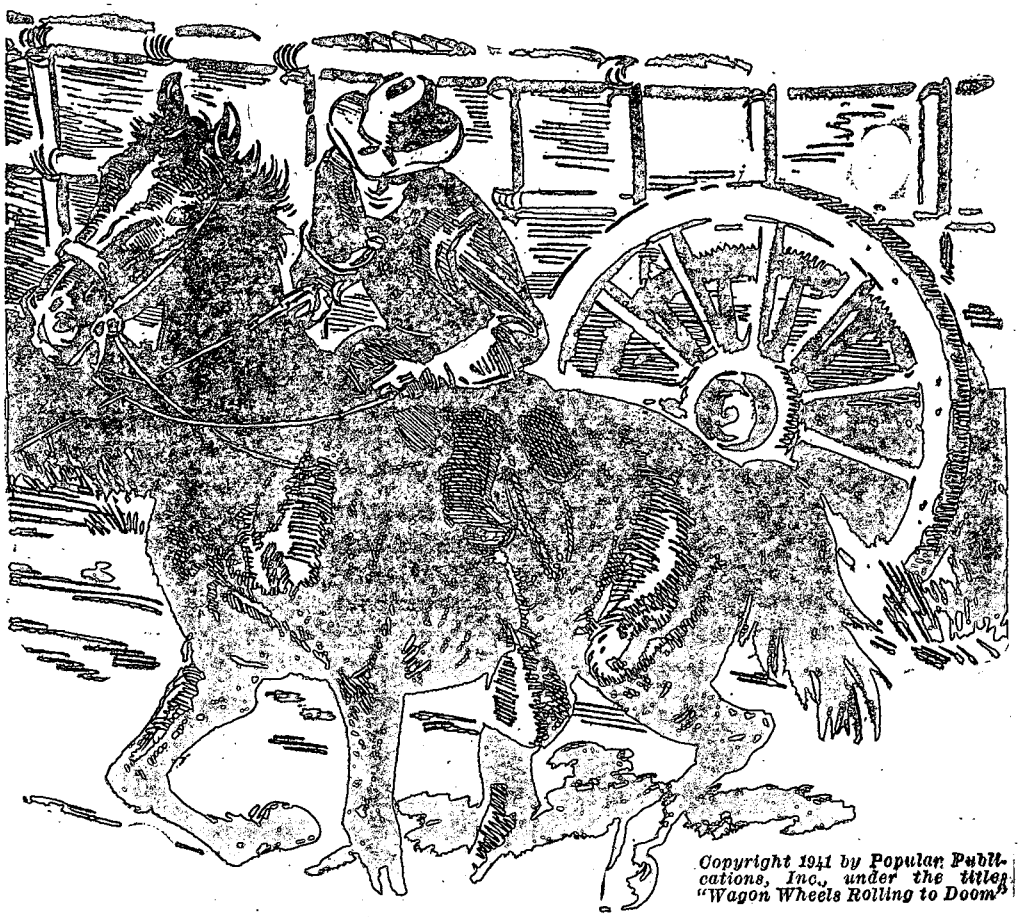

Copyright 1941 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title "Wagon Wheels Rolling to Doom"

Epic Novel of the Overland Trail

By Thomas Calvert McClary

How could young Captain Rand Drew hope to roll that immigrant wagon train through intact, with the greenhorns' beef run off, his troopers drunk—and a blood-crazed enemy waiting to write in gunflame the tragic history of that ill-fated caravan?

CHAPTER ONE

Wagon-Train Mutineers

BREVET CAPTAIN RAND DREW had been in tough spots, but never before had so much almighty hell been ready to pop loose from so many directions at the same

Greenhorn Caravan!

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time. Another two days waiting for the return of their guides and that wagon camp was going to bust open like a volcano.

The immigrant train was nine days west of Fort Laramie, and it had camped in this blistering sink for five. The sun moved like a furnace through the molten-copper sky. The heat was alive, killing and fierce. It burst off the high dun bluffs and smashed in simmering yellow waves across the valley floor. Fine pastel dust had gotten into the salt and sugar, and the bacon was full of colored grit.

The heat had frayed tempers ragged and raw. The loud-mouthed farmer immigrants were drunk and louder voiced than usual to cover their fear. They were in the middle of warring Indian country, yet not an Indian had been seen since the second crossing of the Platte, which was worse than seeing them bobbing along the horizon. The stock was thirsty and down to bone. Whipple, the fanatical reformer, had stirred up half a dozen feuds. There was Blaine, the boss of the cattle outfit, quiet and watchful and dangerous as the desert. Those two thousand white-nosed Herefords would swing a fancy price for breed stock down Taos and Texas way. And just one thing along fourteen hundred miles of Oregon Trail prevented him from driving them down there—the cavalry escort.

ORDERED, by the almighty wisdom of desk generals in Washington, the escort was to accompany the immigrant train with no authority whatever over the civilians, unless the train should be in danger.

It was Blaine who was whetting the ridicule of the immigrants for the "blue-pantie bossmen." It was Blaine's outfit that had been scratching for trouble with the troopers.

Finally, the women were cutting mischief, and one particular lady was driving the captain almost loco! At the moment, the tempestuous Miss Polly Flint was making some acute feminine observations upon military life in general, and cavalry officers in particular. It seemed, she was sputtering, that regulations were more important than romance, and that officers thought more of their horses than of their ladies.

Captain Drew was finding it increasingly difficult to restrain himself from agreeing with her. He could think of many admirable qualities his horse possessed. Also, there was the pleasant fact that a man could whop the devil out of a horse when it got skittish.

He stood with his legs braced solidly apart and his cavalryman's hands locked behind his back. He looked military and disciplined, for all that the dust had soaked into his blues, alkali caked clear up to his thighs. His lean young face was burned to a permanent dark brick red that ran evenly into his chestnut hair. He was big and straight, and serious as death. Which was the chief reason why one of his years was now being spent on the thankless duty of escorting an immigrant train through a country seething with hatred of the white man.

But Polly was giving small consideration to such facts. She stopped dead in the middle of angry pacing and glared at the object of her rage. "Are you listening to me, Rand Drew?" she demanded, her eyes flashing.

"If I'm not, I'm only one in camp who isn't," he answered.

"Oh!" she cried. "Oh-h-hh!" She paused, a small dark tornado gathering fresh strength. "Now, I suppose among my other faults, I've got a shrew's voice?"

The captain remained silent, but there was about his silence an infuriating agreement. Her eyes suggested a pale

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green glacier that had taken fire. She paced another angry circle in the shade of her prairie schooner and planted herself like a female David confronting Goliath.

"Just what, Captain, do you think a lady is composed of?" she demanded icily.

"If you mean *you*," Drew said evenly, "I'd say about even parts of sofa cushions, moonlight, gunpowder—and cuckoo clock!"

Her explosion of wrath nearly choked her with its intensity. She tapped a small, satin-slippered foot upon the hardpan. "I suppose the cuckoo clock refers to the fact that I don't choose to sit out here in the wilderness and turn into a lizard?" she demanded. "Or that I even like a little fun now and then, such as riding out to see the sunset?"

He scowled with weary patience. "This isn't Maryland, Polly. Try and get it through that little head of yours that this is Injun country. In the second place, every time you go riding with a man, it kicks up gossip and trouble. And in the third place—"

"You don't approve of Blaine!" she cut in tauntingly. "If you don't like him, why don't you beat his head off?" Devils danced in her green eyes. "Or hasn't he given you sufficient opportunity?" she inquired dulcetly.

"You think I'm afraid?" he demanded.

She veiled her eyes with thick, long lashes. "Oh, *I* might not think so, Captain. But there are folks in this wagon train who do!" She tipped up suddenly starry eyes and smiled her sweetest.

His face grew cold and impenetrable. "There are reasons why you shouldn't ride with Blaine," he said expressionless. "And sufficient reasons for my not fighting."

"I know," she nodded with mocking civility. "*Regulations!*" The word erupted from her smoldering rage. "Well, the devil with regulations, Rand Drew. Am I a woman or a piece of ordnance?"

ABRUPTLY she seemed miserable and neglected. Her eyes filled with tears, in just the right amount to arouse a man's chivalry. "If you really loved me," she whimpered, "you wouldn't leave me alone so much. Look at last evening, when you were going to take me to see the sunset. . . ."

Drew made noises of suppressed violence. "Listen," he said. "The devil was loose between my troopers and Blaine's outfit. I had plenty to keep me busy."

"There wasn't so much trouble that Blaine couldn't come calling," she sulked.

"I'm sure you had a pleasant evening," he said frostily.

"At least he's got some excitement to him!"

"He's got sixteen notches on his gun and his description up in five states and two territories," Drew added.

She sniffed. "Well, it wouldn't hurt you to break out of that old military shell once in a while."

"I'm afraid you'll have to find your reckless adventures with Blaine."

"And maybe I will, *Captain* Drew!" she flared.

"That's fine!" He bowed stiffly and strode away over the red-baked hardpan.

Polly plopped down with mixed rage and misery onto the steps of her big wagon. Her eyes were dark with brooding and her small chin dug into her hand. "Injuns!" she muttered savagely to herself. "The only Injuns I've seen have been more dirty than dangerous! I think all this talk about the Wild West is something the boys put on to impress the girls back home."

She glanced up to see Blaine lounging lazily toward her. He stopped by the opposite wagon and leaned back against the high-hubbed wheels. His eyes were like black coals. They said what he

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thought, and what he thought about women was pretty plain. He touched his hat, and his desert-hardened mouth twisted in a grin.

She watched him deftly roll a cigarette. His fingers were long and flexible and strong, and, somehow, dangerous. She found him studying her through the thin blue smoke. She colored faintly and dropped her gaze. He frightened her. But more than anything, he was like a giant firecracker. She felt an irresistible impulse to light him and make him explode.

He drawled lazily, "Hear tell the Cap'n don't want his boys mixing up with mine. He give 'em orders not to mess up on no account." He sounded contemptuous, but his eyes looked roiled.

Polly said defensively, "The cavalry's got something else to do besides go around scrapping, Blaine."

"That so?" he drawled with mocking curiosity. "What?"

She looked at him with swift astonishment. What did they have to do? Seemed as if they mostly rode around looking busy and getting ready for trouble that never happened. She bit her lip and looked quickly away to hide her suddenly shaken loyalty.

Blaine laughed. His eyes raked over the petulant, girlish mould of her mouth, and the lithe curves of her slim figure. She could feel his scrutiny, hard and hot, without conscience or respect. It left her excited and fluttery inside.

He said, "Figured to ask you to the Joyce's kettle banding tonight."

"I—I'm—" She looked up confusedly.

He grinned. "No rush. I'll stop by later and find out." He flipped his cigarette into the dust, shot her one keen, piercing glance, and wandered away.

DOWN the wagon line, he saw Drew talking with Sergeant McGillicudy and Whipple, and stopped nearby to lean against a wagon and listen to their heated argument.

Whipple said. "It's very strange you haven't discovered who's giving your men liquor, Captain Drew!"

Drew's face set like an anvil. "Perhaps you have?" he snapped.

The reformer looked triumphant. "I have! Jeek Rider has a whole hogshead in his wagon!"

Drew looked at McGillicudy. The sergeant's leathered face was hard. "None of the men have been drunk, sir!"

Whipple sniffed. "The regulations do not mention intoxication, Captain. They strictly forbid drinking at all in Injun country!" He looked pleased and exultant. "I will accompany you to see that the liquor is destroyed."

Drew's jaws were a mottled gray of self-control. "We don't confiscate private property, Whipple. I will guarantee the sobriety of my troops!"

Whipple tapped bony fingers together. "I should feel it my duty to report that, Captain."

The captain's eyes blazed for an instant before he nodded. Heaven knew, his boys needed a little grog at the end of a baking day to keep from remembering that they had been headed eastward, back to civilization and a country of white people, and decent food, and clean houses, when orders had come to join the train to Oregon.

"Very well," he said. "The honor of destroying the property will be yours, Whipple!"

A taunting laugh cut the pulsing quiet. Blaine stood there, his tall, rangy form leaning lazily against the wagon. There was a sneer on his thin lips, and outright contempt in his beady black eyes. He drawled, "You blue-panties take a terrible kicking around from civilians, don't you, Cap'n?"

"The cavalry will take care of itself, Blaine," Drew snapped.

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"It doesn't seem to be doing so well," Blaine allowed. "I'd calculate to take care of *my* outfit a heap better."

The two men eyed each other, the cattleman's glare hot and killing, the soldier's cold and disciplined. Blaine's hands were stuck idly in his crossed gunbelts. Neither man moved a muscle, yet their bodies were like tensed and compressed steel springs.

"Captain Drew!" Whipple shrilled. "Must I wait while you indulge in a public brawl?"

Drew shot Blaine an icy glance, wheeled and strode away. The absolute silence of his troopers was sharper than the amazement of the farmer immigrants, sharper even than the echo of Blaine's rough laughter, roaring in his ears. But it was Polly Flint who almost sent him back to make Blaine eat his words. There was scorn, almost disgust, upon her face.

He jerked his gaze from hers and marched rigidly past.

Blaine was laughing down the line, but Blaine's eyes weren't laughing. They were smoldering as if he'd been slapped. In six weeks, he hadn't been able to pick a fight with this stiff-backed cavalry officer, and he had done everything but hit him. It was as if Drew did not consider him man enough to fight. "Me!" Blaine rumbled with fury. "With sixteen notches on my gun!"

He had seen men too yellow to fight. He had seen men break with nerves before a gun was touched. Those men ddin't matter. But Drew was not that kind. Maybe Blaine alone of that wagon train—except Sergeant McGillicudy—knew that. Drew was man enough to fight, all right. That he did not was a cold insult that drove Blaine mad with rage, and yet left him humiliated and uncertain of himself.

Blaine stood there alone, queer streaks of red and white flowing beneath the tan of his face. His narrow eyes flicked over the frozen figure of Polly Flint, and his passions changed. By heaven, there were ways to make a man fight—and get some fun into the bargain!

SHE gave him a startled glance and dropped her half-timid, half-inviting eyes, and when she flashed him another covert glance, he was still watching her. A slow, sure smile was on his hard, reckless face.

She tossed her head arrogantly and turned away. But he had seen the tightening of her hands, and the wide, inexperienced expectancy in her eyes.

He watched the swing of her lithe hips as she walked toward the crowd at Rider's wagon. He laughed softly to himself. She'd be soft and submissive in his arms. She hadn't acquired the impassive steel of a frontier woman yet.

The immigrants were gathered in a big circle, grinning and darting mocking glances at Captain Drew. So the Army was being told off by a bluenose reformer! Blaine was about right. The blue-panties were mostly a lot of noise.

Drew had the hogshead of liquor dumped behind Jeek Rider's wagon. He was well within his authority, but that didn't soften the comments of the crowd or the grim silence of his troopers. Not one of them had been drunk on the trail. He could have shut his eyes to a little quiet drinking to help them forget some of the things they'd left behind them.

Polly stood twisting a tiny lace handkerchief and coloring with shame for Drew. She couldn't believe it of him, letting a pussyfoot bluenose interfere with troop business! And taking that flatly open insult from Blaine. She saw the set of his face, but it showed nothing except his glacial wall of suppression. If only he'd flare up, put up some sort of show. But just taking it, with that cool, impersonal quiet, turned her blood hot and dry with anger.

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Whipple's eyes were gleaming, his face fanatical and flushed, as he cracked out the top of the hogshead. Raw, sour-smelling red-eye flashed in the sun, gurgled downgrade, over the baked hardpan toward the juniper-hidden spring. What McGillicudy particularly noticed was that the hardpan was so baked that the liquor ran over it as it would over tile. He shot his captain a guilty glance.

Drew looked straight at him without expression. He said abruptly, "Time for the evening detail, Sergeant."

"Yes, sor!" McGillicudy snapped to with alacrity, turned and scowled officially at the troopers. "Water detail, fall—*in!*"

The troopers looked at him as if he were crazy, for customarily the detail performed its duties two hours later, at sundown.

The sergeant glowered. "What do you think this is—a holiday?" He marched them off on the double.

A HARD smile flicked over Drew's lips. At least his troopers would catch one last weak drink as that liquor rolled into the spring! He glanced at Polly, who was trembling with anger and watching him with blazing eyes. He knew what she was thinking. She thought he had given a work detail to get the sullen troops out of the way.

"A fine thing," she said. "Letting a crazy reformer bully you like that."

"There are regulations, Polly," he pointed out.

"Regulations!" she repeated with tearful scorn. "I'll bet Blaine wouldn't let bluenose regulations hamper *his* men!"

"Probably not," Drew agreed through tight lips.

"And I'll bet if he were in your shoes he'd be running his train the way *he* wanted it!" she flared on. "And he'd let no man insult him, either!"

"You win all bets," Drew said through clenched teeth. "Maybe you better take up with Blaine and forget the cavalry."

"Maybe I had!" she cried hotly, and watched the stiffness of his broad back going into the beating yellow glare beyond.

She felt a sudden hollowness in her breast, as if each of his footsteps were some part of her heart marching farther and farther away, into a void she could never enter. Desperately, she wanted to run after him and tell him that she was sorry, that she was a spoiled brat who needed a spanking, and really didn't know what it was all about.

Instinctively, she turned; but Slim Burnett was standing there. His gossipy old face was leering, his mouth gaping in a toothless grin. "Danged if I ever seen a prettier girl ever walked out on!" he cackled.

Her pert nose went up into the air.

"If you mean Captain Drew, he has no claims on me, nor I on him, Slim Burnett!"

"He was taking you to the kettle banding, wasn't he?"

"He was not!" Polly sniffed. "I promised Mister Blaine that I'd go with him."

The snickers and grins of the crowd vanished as if wiped off. In that terrible chaotic instant of her lie, she felt the respect the crowd gave Blaine. Nobody was snickering about him, or about his girl! Polly shot the crowd a haughty glance and turned defiantly for the security of her wagon.

CHAPTER TWO

Bullwhip Man

DREW stood on the picket line, squinting into the blazing sunlight. He felt edged and raw inside. He knew it was a long, tough trip, filled mostly with heat and dirt and malicious gossip, for a lone girl used to the flirtatious, dancing beaux

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of a fox-hunting Maryland town. He gave a sudden grim smile, flicked with fondness. She was a capricious little rebel, but he loved her. He'd just have to take her the way she was, and wait for her to learn. . . .

The heat was blistering. At the end of the wagon line, two thousand prime shorthorns crowded into the scanty shade of their own bodies to escape the sun. They were practically the total wealth of these Oregon immigrants. They had to be worked through right, and without loss.

That was why Blaine had been picked to bring them through. He was a crack cowman, no denying that. Also he had the only cattle outfit along the Oregon trail. Which was why, like it or not, they had to keep him—at least until they got well along North Fork.

The difficulty was, Drew suspected, that Blaine had other ideas for the herd. If a brawl came up one of two things would happen. Blaine's outfit would do enough damage to the troopers to get away in the confusion with the herd. Or, if Blaine was licked, he'd light out overnight. That was the way with cowmen, Drew reflected. They didn't take lickings and stay on the same range.

And that meant, come hell or high water, Drew had to avoid a fight if possible. He wished his guides would return so they could get rolling again. Not much trouble could blow off in a wagon train on the move. There was just too much plain cussed hard work to let seething tempers boil over.

He turned into his tent to wash down and shave. When he came out into the brassy glare he stared straight into the livid face of Whipple.

"Your sergeant," the lean reformer screamed. "He's blind drunk!"

"He's *what*?" the officer barked. Without waiting for a reply he roared, "McGillicudy!"

The grizzled sergeant tumbled out of a wagon. His walk was more of a float; his face was flushed and beaming with contentment. He came up, saluted and hiccuped. Each of his eyes had an independent idea of where it wanted to look.

"Where did you get it?" Drew demanded.

"So help me, sor, haven't touched a drop of whish—of whiskey today, sor! Not a drop of anything exshept the water at the shrpr—at the sping!"

"Are you going to let him lie like that?" Whipple shrilled.

"You shut up and get back to your quarters before my men lynch you!" Drew snapped so sharply that Whipple scurried off, as if believing that the officer might order that done himself.

Drew calculated quickly how strong that spring water could have been after the remains of the whiskey flowed into it. It wasn't possible the mixture could have been strong enough to hit a man like McGillicudy. He strode through the wagons and down to the spring, and studied the scooped out basin.

The raw scent of whiskey was heavy on the hot air. After a moment he spotted what he was looking for in a clump of bushes—an empty barrel, lying on its side among the juniper. Somebody beside the troopers had known that whiskey was running down to the spring, somebody who wanted to see them blind drunk. Whoever it was had spiked the spring with that additional liquor!

"Blaine's crowd!" Drew said to himself. His eyes grew cold. Sure there was going to be trouble now. If it were fists, he wouldn't have cared. But there'd be guns blazing, and a gunfight was no time for men to be drunk.

HE CAME up the hill and stood irresolutely before Polly's wagon. After a moment, he squared his shoulders and knocked.

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She pushed back the canvas flaps and stood at the top of the steps, her eyes red-rimmed, her throat trembling. She held out her hands in a quick, beseeching gesture, then, as if ashamed, withdrew them wordlessly.

But Drew hadn't caught that slight, momentary gesture of surrender. Instead, his eyes had drifted on past, to focus on something in the distance. He said abruptly, "You'll please stay out of Blaine's end of the camp, and keep him away from here."

The clipped authority of his tone hit her like cold water. She bridled, "Are you trying to order me around, Rand Drew?"

He did not look at her. He said expressionlessly, "Take it as you like. This is a military order."

"Oh, a *military* order!" she mocked with bitter hurt. "I suppose I'm just like —like a horse or something, now?"

A vein along his temple began to throb. He said softly, "Polly, there's liable to be trouble. Trouble inside a train makes trouble from outside easier. There are certain rules civilians have to obey, and there are reasons for those rules."

"Rules and reasons!" she blazed.

At another time he might have noticed the quiver of her lips and guessed the tumult in her breast. But right now all he could see was that she was being stubborn and making things as difficult as possible.

He looked at her bleakly, freezing back the rage that sprang from the suppressed desire and need he had of her. Sometimes he thought it might have been easier if he hadn't asked her to marry him. At least, he considered, he wouldn't have been left dangling in the air like this.

He said coolly, "That order will be obeyed, Polly, or you'll be confined to your wagon!"

Then he marched stiffly away.

He left her wide-eyed and gasping, with an unreasoning, bitter fury seething through her. Her tears dried like water under a badlands sun. If he thought he could order her around like that—well, he'd better think again!

She saw Blaine riding toward her, and stood so that the lines of her body pressed in provocative relief against her clinging dress. She looked up at him with a fiercely challenging boldness, and with a trace of defiance, too.

Swift surprise crossed his face and was quickly masked. He said, "Figured maybe you'd want to ride out this evening and see the sunset from the rim."

"Why not?" she said. "I've been trying to see it for four days."

He said, "You sound like you'd eat the sun. If you're ready in about an hour or so, I'll have your pony saddled."

"I'll be ready," she said, her throat tight. And it sounded as if she had said, "I'll be ready for anything!"

He shot her a contemplative look, and rode away.

He rode loosely, like part of his horse, and not with the straight military stiffness of Rand Drew. And still, Polly thought, on the cross-country race, before they had taken each other's measure and the deep enmity had grown between them, the two men had ridden neck and neck, with not a length difference at the finish.

It gave her a sudden stab of conscience. She had an acute feeling that maybe she really didn't know Rand Drew. But then she recalled the curtness of his order, and her chin tilted defiantly.

DREW found McGillicudy soaking wet from a dousing and looking sheepish. He said, "How are the men, Sergeant?"

"Eight sober, five near to middling," the sergeant reported. "But I'll have the heathens sober in four hours, if I have to bake 'em out on the cliff side, sor!"

"Disarm every man until they're sober, and keep them clear of Blaine's outfit while—"

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A strangled shriek interrupted him. The two men began running.

A trooper staggered out drunkenly from behind Blaine's chuck wagon, pitched in the dust and clawed frantically. An eerie sound came thickly from his throat. "Lord!" he was gasping. "Give me a gun!"

They rolled him over, and the sight hit at them with solid impact. The man's lips were almost cut off.

Drew looked beyond the wagon toward Kell, Blaine's top hand, who stood snaking a bullwhip in the dust. The man's eyes were red and narrowed, his lips twisted in a malicious grin. "Maybe there's some more blue-panties don't think I can shut them up!" he rasped.

"So help me, I'll Injun him!" McGillicudy choked.

Drew grabbed his sergeant's gun hand. He pressed his wrist until the pain stabbed through his killing fury. He said levelly, "Take care of Heagan, Sergeant!"

"But, sor—"

"Orders!" Drew snapped. "I'll settle with this sidewinder!"

The trailhand's grin froze. His face went gray with anger. Then, noticing Drew wore no pistol, his eyes grew gloating and cruel. "Reckon that will take some settlement, Cap'n!"

Kell, the Blaine ramrod, stood with his long legs apart testing his weight on his boot heels. His right hand flicked the heavy whip slowly, weaving it through the dust, stretching its braided tip farther and farther in little hops, so that Drew had no chance to close in.

He drawled, "You know, Cap'n, I'll bet its plumb agin rules for you to be messin' up with civilians."

"You're no civilian," Drew said quietly. "You're a lowdown, belly-crawling snake!"

His eyes were pale blue flames, and the light came out of them in flat shafts of murder.

The man hesitated, his eyes darting about, as if figuring the odds.

Two more of Blaine's men leaned unconcerned against a pile of gear. "What's wrong, Kell," one of them taunted. "This blue-pantie too much for you, account of he's sober?"

Kell gave a derisive growl. His wrist flexed, and suddenly the whip sang through the air.

Drew's body jerked aside as the whip cracked deafeningly beside his ear. He snagged the tip, tore the whip free before the man could draw it back. Like lightning, his legs straightened. He closed, driving a solid fist that smashed blood and teeth through Kell's lips and stretched him on the ground.

Kell jerked to a sitting position, sobbing with rage. "No damned blue-pantie's going to get away with that!" he cried thickly. His hand reached for his gun.

Drew let out a battle roar and dropped on the man's hand. The gun roared beside his face. He grappled, felt the steel blister his hand as two more shots roared out. Then he had wrenched the gun clear.

Thumbs like hot irons were jabbing in his eyes. He felt the man's hot, whiskey breath. He raked violently with the pistol and felt the impact tear through flesh. A sob of pain ripped from Kell's throat. But his hands were around Drew's windpipe, and his knee came up in a vicious arc.

For that instant the pain drove any thought of self-control from Drew's mind. He beat out with a savage, killing ferocity, lashing at the pale smudge of the man's face. Kell gave a thick shriek of defeat, broke clear and crawled out of reach.

Drew struggled up with chest heaving. He stared at the other two cowhands, who stood motionless. Drew said scornfully, "It looks like you hombres are only tough when you have a gun on the other man!"

"Don't class us with that skunk, mis-

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ter!" one of the punchers growled. "We'll fight you any time you like. But we don't pull irons on a man who isn't heeled."

Drew ejected the shells from the gun's cylinders and threw the empty weapon down beside Kell. "Then I reckon that evens the score," he snapped.

The puncher who had disclaimed Kell regarded him with an expressionless face. "Maybe the boss won't think so, Cap'n. Kell was a mighty good rope man, even if he ain't got much guts. Now he ain't fit for nothin', 'cept the buzzards."

"Blaine knows where to find me," Drew growled, and turned back to his tent.

One thing, at least: This boiled down now to trouble between Blaine and himself alone. No cowpuncher or trooper would start any ruckus before the bosses had settled their hash. But there'd be trouble coming—bad trouble, and soon.

CHAPTER THREE

Two Tough Hands—And a Girl!

HE WASN'T wrong. Blaine was idling beside a wagon when Drew came out. The cowman's eyes looked like a snake's. He said, "Cap'n, that was a powerful purty job you done on my best rope wrangler!"

Drew regarded him levelly. "You hear about what he did to one of my best troopers?"

Blaine nodded, his eyes never leaving Drew's face. "'Pears like your trooper got hisself drunk and come over looking for trouble. He got what he come for. That should have settled it."

He spat out a quid of tobacco, and his beady eyes narrowed. "So the way I figure, you blue-panties are one man up on us. It needs settlement." He gave a contemptuous gesture at Drew's empty hip. "Seeing as you was so careful to forget your shooting iron again, I'll give you time to go back and get it, Cap'n."

"I won't need a gun for you," Drew said coldly.

The color drained from the other's face. "You *what*?"

"I can take the fight out of you with fists," Drew said. He felt even the troopers' consternation. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Polly's tightly drawn white face. Her shocked eyes. It gave him a bitter stab inside. It almost took the fight out of him.

Blaine was staring at him hard. He said, "By gorry—and they give you pink-cheeked blue-pantie rabbits *medals!* So that's the way the cavalry fights—*with fists!* What do you think this is Cap'n, the little red school shack?"

"Looks like it," Drew nodded. "And it looks like you're needing a lesson." He met the other's gaze with a goading quiet. "Unless you cow-jacks are scared to fight without guns?"

"I ain't scared of nothin'!" the cowman roared. He ripped off his guns and tossed them to a puncher, "I'll fight you with fists, mister, but you'll wish you'd used guns and gotten it over faster!"

Drew tossed off his tunic. Blaine was a giant, tough as oiled rawhide and springy as a cat. There was murder in his killer's eye, and the rage of six weeks of hankering for trouble. The two looked at each other. Then they closed, like the meeting of two unleashed waters.

Blaine smashed through a blow that would have crushed an ox's head, but Drew rolled out from under it and belted a stinger to Blaine's midriff. They both stood off, taking each other's measure with fresh respect. The cowman's eyes were black diamonds of hot hate. The officer's eyes, a calculating, glacial blue.

Blaine came in with a sudden rush, but wary and expert, not with the flying fists of most desert men. When his fists came through, they landed like battering rams. Drew fought carefully, keeping out of the

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giant's reach, giving his elbows and the top of his head to Blaine's iron fists. One of the cowman's blows exploded on his head. In the whirling, roaring darkness that swamped him, he felt Blaine close with a lock, and grit into his ear. "That one's for a kiss I'm going to get, blue-pantie!"

Battle lust surged through Drew in a sheet of flame. Power and quickness flowed through his muscles. He smashed open the cowman's eye and then his lip. But the man was slowly rushing him back, step by step. There was a calculated purpose in it. Suddenly he realized Blaine was edging him back into a wagon wheel, where the iron-bound hub would crash into his back.

With a lightning twist, he ducked under Blaine's guard. They locked, fell, crashed to the ground. Excited faces, wagons, earth and sky, blurred in a wild circle as they rolled. They smashed and battered across the hardpan. Their muscles were sore and stiff, their breaths came in great sobbing gasps. They fell apart with heaving lungs, barely able to sit with arms braced, and quivering with fatigue. But the fury and the challenge was still in their eyes.

"One hour even," McGillicudy called out with a note of envy.

Soaked with sweat and blood and dirt, and wet with water their men had poured over them, they were just getting to their feet when the furious pound of hoofs held them motionless. A hard-riding figure burst up the wagon line. Alkali streaked his horse, and beneath the coating of fine gray powder, the man's fringed buckskins were flying in the wind.

"It's Owl Lacouer!" the sergeant barked.

The halfbreed scout tumbled from his pony, blinked curiously at Drew, grinned in spite of his weariness. "Utes got Two Moon," he reported. "Big party of warriors—maybe three hundred."

Drew glared at the cowman. "This fight will have to wait, Blaine."

"I never let Injuns interfere with my personal fights!" Blaine said through clenched teeth.

He snapped his gunbelts out of the puncher's hands. "I'm giving you due notice, Drew. I started to make this a gunfight, and that's the way I aim to end it. You wear your gun from now on. When you see me, reach for it!"

But Drew was already running toward his tent, listening to the swift ejaculations of his scout.

POLLY saw Blaine's hate-filled eyes drift across to her. She knew what was in his mind—the same thing that was in the minds of most of the men around there.

It was gun-country, and Drew had wriggled out of a gunfight. An ordinary beating didn't mean much to men who took worse than that every time they broke a horse or rode into a stampede.

Blaine's eyes said that, and then the hard, burning light in them somehow changed, and they told her something else. The look left her inert and strengthless with its wild, furious heat.

Desperately, she dragged her gaze from his, looking wildly toward the only person who might give her strength.

But Rand Drew was standing outside his tent talking with the scout, and there was nothing but the stern reflection of military duty in his face.

One of Blaine's punchers nudged his boss, nodding toward the scout. "He came in from the east, Blaine. The Injuns must be hard on his dust. And with all these soldiers drunk and the Taos trail just west a piece . . ."

"Shut up!" Blaine snapped. He shook himself like a bear, as if to shake off some inward strife. "I never ran out on a fight yet that wasn't settled!" he said.

The puncher batted his eyes. "That

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fight got your head boiling, boss? There's two thousand good beeves here, and with the Injuns keeping this camp busy . . ."

"When I need you to think for me, I'll tell you!" Blaine snarled. "Now shut your trap before I shut it for you!"

His men looked sullen as they drifted back for their own wagons. Blaine leaned against a wagon, hot and cold with fury. Now he had an unfinished fight on his hands, which was bad enough, but because he hadn't won it, he was even getting lip from his own men!

He saw a bugler report at Drew's tent, careen about with the lingering effect of rotgut, go ten paces, and blow *Assembly*. Men came stumbling out of a dozen different wagons. Eighteen fell into line—and there should have been forty-three! Half the men couldn't have ridden a hard five miles at the moment, or nicked the side of a cliff with a carbine at fifty paces.

He had all the cards in his hand for a clean getaway, with no trouble to speak of. One thing he couldn't avoid was that he hadn't licked Drew. And the girl knew it. But worse, he knew it himself.

He turned savagely and dragged his spurs to his horse. He tightened the cinches and swung astride, spurring over to where his men were gathered in a knot. They fell sullenly silent as he pulled up.

"All right!" he growled. "I'm only the boss here! What's itching your crummy hides?"

A grizzled puncher cleared his throat. He wore a black Mexican sombrero, and beneath it, his eyes were leaden in his gray-whiskered face. He drawled, "We'd kind of like to know what you aim to do, boss."

Blaine spat. He didn't know what he was going to do himself. But he had an idea they knew what they were going to do—even if it meant drygulching him.

"You're still boss," the speaker went on uneasily. "But we got a right to know what you're figuring. That ain't our fight with Captain Drew, boss, it's yours."

Blaine glowered at them. "A fine nest of sidewinders! Did I ever set by and see you get done out of a pot?"

HE LOOKED at them one by one, his reins loose, his hands barely resting on the leather of his holsters. "No!" he roared in answer to himself. "Savvy this, then: I still run this outfit. If there's any mustang feeling frisky, let him reach!"

Nobody moved. But the sullenness was still there, tense and throbbing, and ready to boil.

His face took on a poker blankness. "All right, I ought to gun-whip the pack of you, but we got other fish to fry. Right now we got all the cards, and we're going to play them. But nobody's opening this pot until I do."

He stared at them, his eyes hard. "That clear? Now you hit leather and close that herd for a stampede. Cut out the oxen and sheep. When we start, we're traveling fast!"

He jerked his pony around without waiting and rode up the line of wagons. He wouldn't lower himself to look back. He heard the first three horses canter away and knew he had bluffed them. It was bluff—he still didn't know what he aimed to do about Drew.

In the saddle, he sat scowling at the officer's tent. Drew came out, cleaned and brushed. Blaine gave a low snort of laughter, but inside himself he felt that strange mystification. It gave his baffled rage fresh tinder. It had taken him six weeks to pick a fight with Drew, and then the coyote had tricked him out of a gunfight. But Drew would wash and clean up for a fight with Injuns!

His glance suddenly raked Drew's gun, worn high, cavalry fashion, on his belt. Blaine's eyes set and glinted. "Drew!" he called out as if the name were a lead pellet. "Put your hand on that gun!"

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The officer glared at him coldly. "This is no time for personal fights, man!"

"It is with me!" Blaine corrected. "Reach, or I'll plug you like a jackrabbit!"

Blaine sat absolutely motionless, both his hands on the pommel. He thought contemptuously of a government that would make a man wear that kind of holster. Any bald-faced kid could draw faster than an Army man!

Drew shot him a look of scorn such as he'd never had from any man, and the officer's hand flashed to his pistol butt.

"Start drawing!" Blaine roared.

HE SAW Drew's fingers tighten around the pistol butt. His right hand suddenly dropped. He made a lightning motion of the wrist. His gun barrel gleamed in the sun, and his gun roared twice.

Drew fired once and dropped his gun. The hot flame of a bullet tore through Blaine's left arm. He saw Drew slump. He wheeled his horse, jumping a wagon tongue and heading swiftly toward the closing herd.

Blaine was a dead shot and did not look back. He knew men would be running with rifles to gun him. He gave a cool, twisting grin as Polly ran down from her wagon, flinging him an accusing glance.

"You—you've *killed* him!" she choked.

"More'n likely," he rasped. He bent down, caught her against his chest and was galloping on before she realized what had happened. She gave his muscled chest a few inffectual beats with her little hands. Then, suddenly, she went limp and began to sob.

Blaine was a killer. All his life he had felt a great surge of victory when another man dropped before his smoking guns. The spoils of victory he took with a feeling that they were rightly his.

He waited for that feeling of elation now, anticipating the uplift from memory. It didn't come. He looked down at the sobbing girl, thinking that here was the visible proof of his winning, just as an Indian warrior takes a scalp. Still there was no elation. Instead, he had the distinct feeling that he had won nothing; that maybe even dead, Drew had been the better man. The feeling had nothing to do with the nick in his arm or the girl's sobbing. It was something that only a fighting man could feel.

When he got to the herd line he was black with rage. The boys were bunching the beeves into a solid wedge, yelling and grinning now that they had action.

"Get 'em moving!" Blaine yelled. "Stampede 'em this side of the wagons. Right low, this side."

There was a burst of yells, the snap of whips, and the rolling bark of big guns rent the air. The cattle began to mill and bawl. Punchers raced in and out between closing groups, waving blankets, beating the dogies, shooting off six-shooters. There was dust and danger in the air.

It was a scene that set a cowman's blood to coursing, no matter how many times he had seen it before. But today Blaine watched without spirit, feeling only that deep dissatisfaction that maybe he had not won. He kept wondering what the outcome of the shooting would have been if Drew had really felt like fighting. . . . Then he looked down at the girl with sudden surprise. He'd forgotten he was holding her.

The stampede was on. Bawling, frightened waves of white faces flung back their heads, eyes wild, and tried to climb back of those in front. Two thousand of them ploughed a thundering wedge of smoky dust along the wagon line. A wagon went over, others were knocked out of line.

Soldiers and immigrants began peppering the dust cloud over the top of the herd, but the dust was thick. The bullets whined harmlessly over the grinning rustlers. A few whined after them as they chased the herd up and out of the sink,

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and over the free, rolling trail toward the cool Wind River Hills ahead.

Blaine looked back from the canyon rim and gave a snort. Only six troopers had managed to get their mounts rounded and saddled. And six troopers wouldn't follow—unless they hankered for sudden graves.

"Settle 'em down to a pace and hold 'em there!" Blaine commanded. He looked down at the girl with a scowl. Her body was strengthless in that strange way of a woman when two men have fought for her and the victor has taken her.

He said, "You didn't love him?"

"I—I don't know!" she sobbed.

"You'll know when you love me!" he boasted.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rustlers' Standoff

IN CAMP, Sergeant McGillicudy wiped dust out of his eyes and swore violently. "Begorra, I'll sign for another stretch and stay out here just to meet that prairie pig!" he rumbled. He looked at his captain. "What about the girl?"

Drew was stretched on the ground, his trouser leg cut away, his face chalk white beneath his burn. He said, "Blaine's a killer, but he's no Injun, Sergeant! The girl will be safe."

He swallowed hard. He'd gotten Blaine's measure in that fist fight. And he knew the peculiar code of men like Blaine. Killers, they wouldn't draw on a man who wasn't armed. Thieves, and careless in their loves, they wouldn't cock an eye toward a decent woman, unless she looked at them first. That was what hurt.

McGillicudy said, "I'd like to show them rustlers a little cavalry shooting!"

"You'll get plenty of shooting by sundown!" Drew commented grimly. He turned to the buckskin-clad breed scout. "You give the Utes another half-hour?"

"They're bad riders," Owl said, with Sioux deprecation. "But even Utes should make it by then."

McGillicudy straightened from over his captain's leg. "Cut the ligiment, the bullet did, sor! Nothing worse."

Drew laughed mirthlessly. Thoughts of the girl were buried deep inside of him. He was a soldier again, with a soldier's hard humor. "That will burn Blaine up when he learns about it, Sergeant!"

The sergeant finished bandaging his captain's leg. "I've ordered the drunks given mustard, sor. They'll be sober when trouble comes."

"How many of these farmers can we count on?" Drew asked.

"Seventy-three are not down with fever. Maybe twenty of 'em can look into an Injun's eye and shoot straight."

"Sixty-six shooting men, and fifty to make a noise," Drew nodded. "That will do."

He sat up on the ground and snapped out orders. Men jumped to obey. The excitement of a coming battle was in their blood.

Oxen were yoked. Creaking and groaning, the great wagons began to circle around the tents. There was the hectic activity of building barricades, loading guns, getting animals roped tight.

In the midst of it, Owl lifted his black, seamed face and listened intently. Drew was now mounted. "Utes?" he asked.

Owl shook his head. "Not even Utes shoot that bad. It is a stampede of many animals. Maybe buffalo." He kicked his horse, jumped the low stockade and streaked out for the basin rim.

Five minutes later he reappeared and galloped back into the wheel-shaped wagon fort. He shrugged. "Maybe buffalo. They turned off into an arroyo a mile away. Maybe Utes scared them from their grazing."

"Why didn't you find out?" McGillicudy asked with elaborate innocence.

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Owl grimaced. "It was doing that which caused Two Moon's death. The Utes should come now, soon."

LONG, tense minutes passed. The sun rolled through the metallic sky and the heat surged over the valley floor. It struck a solid wave of powder blue across the middle of the canyon, where a wall of volcanic rock reared up.

Beyond the wall, the valley dipped a hundred feet. The sheep and extra stock had been driven there for safety. A low, vibrant pounding of ground was coming from that direction.

"What's ailing those blithering banshees?" McGillicudy bellowed. "Maybe the Injuns are down there stampeding 'em off the other way."

Owl shook his head. "Utes heap good warriors. No other animals until after battle. Rather have scalps than sheep."

In a wagon, a baby cried and was soothed against its mother's breast. A woman broke out in hysterical sobs. There was the impact of her husband's fist silencing her. The sound of loading cartridges made a small, incessant drone.

The distant, muffled bark of a gun floated over the sound-deadening blue wall that crossed the valley. A volley followed, punctuating a swell of war whoops. McGillicudy's back stiffened like a bulldog's. He shot their halfbreed scout a dark look.

"I go see," Owl announced.

"I'll go with ye, you wrinkled rabbit, just to be sure you don't see sheep shoot up each other!" the sergeant announced. They galloped off toward the ridge.

The sound of firing became a steady crackle. The whoops of Indians came as from a great distance, but guttural and wild and merciless. The faces of the immigrant women turned pale. McGillicudy thundered back across the hard-baked flats.

"It's the Utes, sor!" he reported with a grin. "And who do you think they got surrounded? Blaine!"

Drew's face tightened. If they had Blaine surrounded, Polly was there, too!

Drew felt his calmness crack and disintegrate as if an earthquake were erupting beneath him. In an hour or so the Utes might clean out Blaine; they might ride off the herd beyond the valley wall without ever knowing the immigrant train was there. The safety of that wagon train might lie in doing nothing for Blaine's relief. Against that was a soldier's instinct. Even though they were rustlers, Blaine's men were white. And the girl was there!

McGillicudy said hopefully, "If we don't smoke 'em out now, sor, they'll be waiting for us up trail."

"They won't," Drew said stonily. "They'll be driving those cows home to their villages."

"The Injuns are no more than two hundred and fifty—three hundred, at most," the sergeant added.

Drew gave a humorless grin. He looked around at the silent, nervous settlers. "Your cows and a white woman are over there," he said. "If we take the fight to 'em, we may keep the train safe."

"What's stopping you?" Niggs, the wagon master, demanded.

"If we don't win, there are not enough men left in the train to hold them off," Drew said flatly.

The immigrants turned off into small groups and began to argue. Their fortunes were over there—but their scalps were still safely on their heads.

Whipple, the long-nosed reformer, stared at Drew. In his bitter, shriveled heart, he could understand the sacrifice Drew was making. He could guess the conflict taking place in the officer's soul—leaving the girl, Polly, to the Indians in order to save the immigrant women. He began to see in Drew something shining and fine.

Whipple drew himself to his full height

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and pointed a bony, accusing finger at the men. "Would you be cowards to save your own scalps?" he blazed out with fanatical accusation. "There is a woman over there—one wayward, perhaps, but white! A woman who might be your own sister or your daughter!"

Mrs. Niggs said vibrantly, "Go fight them, Captain Drew! We're all in this together. Why should one of us be sacrificed for the rest?"

The battle light came into Drew's eyes. Then his gaze clouded as he thought that probably he was going to save the girl for Blaine. But at least he could fight for her and still discharge his duty! He lifted his arm, and the blue column of fighting men stretched out, heading for the wall.

Presently, from atop the strange formation, the dusty troopers looked down on the scene of battle. Making a stand in the field of boulders, Blaine's men held a yelling, painted horde of Utes circling at a distance.

Below, Drew saw an arced arrow fall in among the stones. A man staggered to the ground and fell back flat. Drew's eyes were grim as he saw Polly cowering not five feet away from that man.

Suddenly, he raised his hand. Without bugles, the troop went over the wall and down a precarious break on the other side. Not until they were on the valley floor did the Indians see them.

In broken file the troopers streamed out at an angle to the Utes, their carbines barking. The Indians stopped, milled, made a mass charge.

"Sabers!" Drew roared. "Right through them, men!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Blood on the Trail

AS A loud bugle blared behind the Indians, the men grinned, answering the guttural war-whoops with shouts as deep and savage. Charging, they saw McGillicudy lead one group down off another part of the cliff, catching the Indians from the rear. The two columns struck with the impact of a hurricane. The troopers came through shouting, their sabers red. The Utes broke and raced out of range for council.

"Over here!" Blaine yelled from his boulder fort.

Drew barked an order for McGillicudy to take the men to the other boulders, and rode over to Blaine alone.

Blaine had one bad arm, a slice on his scalp, and had been loading the last guns with his teeth. He grinned. "So I missed you?"

"I'm no ghost!" Drew told him. "But you'll be one, if you don't get over and take cover with my men."

Drew glanced at the girl, his gaze cold and inexpressive. She lay against a boulder, her body wracked with sobs.

She looked at him with frightened eyes. "Don't let them take me, Rand!" She looked with wild hysteria from one to the other. Her voice grew full of her own concern. "Take me away! Blaine—Rand. . . ."

"How about those women in the wagon train?" Drew snapped.

"What do they matter?" the girl cried. "They can take care of themselves! But I'm so—so frightened!"

Blaine gave a hard, twisted grin. "Frontier spirit, I call it!" he said.

Drew looked at him bleakly, feeling half sick inside.

Blaine picked up the girl and tossed her over his shoulder. He said, "We're only in this for the Injuns, Drew."

Drew nodded. "We'll have a score to settle later, Blaine," he said, jerking his head toward the returning Utes. Blaine climbed into his saddle, and they streaked for the other boulders.

Drew barked at McGillicudy, "Cache the woman in a safe place!"

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The sergeant noted the term "woman," and the grim pallor of Drew's face. He cursed. As if things weren't bad enough already, now the captain had to get stuck with woman trouble! "We've put forty-one of those war-whoops out of the fighting!" he reported, and let fly with his carbine.

He spat with satisfaction. "Forty-*two,*" he grinned in correction.

The firing and rain of arrows was incessant. The Utes drew off, held a powwow, and came streaming back with throaty yells, spread out, their bodies bent over their ponies, straight for the boulders.

"Here it comes!" McGillicudy growled lustily. "It's knives and sabers now, boys!" He glanced back at the girl; she was pale but composed.

The Utes thundered up in a wave of fury. They slipped from their ponies as they passed between the rocks. Atop a front boulder, the scout, Owl, lay stretched out with a heavy war club. He accounted for eight braves before the line got through beneath him.

There came Drew's cool voice directing the battle in the boulders.

The sergeant was cursing like the Old Nick himself, and roaring. "It's only five to one, now, boys. At 'em, lads!"

Owl, the scout, got down and took his scalps. The battle could wait, but the spirits of eight Ute warriors might get off to the Happy Hunting Ground in good condition unless he took their scalps.

The fight was moving away near Polly, and Owl clambered up to her ledge and lifted her like a sack of meal.

He carried her over five rocks and dumped her unceremoniously behind the place where Drew was fighting.

The officer was afoot now, his game leg wedged in between two rocks so that he could only fight on that pivot.

"Heap good warrior!" Owl considered. "Too bad him white man, or would amount to something!"

THE SCOUT turned to leisurely consideration of the space between the rocks. Where there was fighting, the white men were holding the fronts of fissures. The Utes were a howling, hideously painted pack in the alleys between. Owl decided a short-horn steer could get into those alleys.

Jumping from stone to stone, he rushed to the outer fringe of boulders. He dropped upon his horse and raced for the herd milling along the distant canyon wall. He cut out a couple of hundred beeves, drove them toward the battle.

The cattle got their first blast of the fierce yelling and screaming, the groans of dying, the smell of blood. They tried to back, but the panicked beasts behind drove them on. Bucking and pitching and wild, frenziedly looking for a way out, the herd stampeded further in. The cattle charged in blind panic, stamping the Utes under, pushing on madly.

In the middle of this stampede, the fight went on. The two sides were about evenly numbered now, but the Utes were disorganized. They turned with sudden desperation to escape. With a yell of triumph, troopers took out after them.

Drew trapped three in his corridor, shot one and knifed the second. But the knife snapped as he twisted it clear. His gun was empty. The third brave came at him, his face twisted in a leer of hate. Drew ducked. A club hit his head a glancing blow.

He slumped to the ground, feeling numb, unable to move a muscle. His senses were clear enough, but he couldn't yell, couldn't even move a finger. He saw the leering, painted face come down over his. The hot breath of the warrior blasted at his nostrils. He felt his scalp lock gripped and the sharp edge of a knife pry in.

He thought, with grimly ironic humor, that Blaine would never be sure which of them had been best man now.

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The pain in his scalp increased. His senses fogged. He realized suddenly that the knife was no longer there. He was conscious that there was fighting beside him, but he couldn't turn to see it. . . .

Abruptly, Drew found that he could move again. He twisted his head painfully. What he saw left him sure that he was already scalped, and that all this was hallucination. For Polly Flint, who had wanted to run away, who had turned green and sick at sight of a man's mangled arm, was fighting a Ute brave like a little wildcat. At the moment she had her sharp, white teeth firmly embedded in the Ute's back between the shoulders. She was kicking and trying savagely to stab him with his own knife.

The brave gave a sudden lunch and threw her clear, and at that instant Blaine dropped on him like a hawk. There was a thick, choked roar of hate, then silence. The brave lay still. Polly, with heaving lungs, flopped down, breathless and gasping, upon the warrior's chest and looked with desperate relief at Drew.

"He was going to—to k-kill you!" she gasped.

Drew sat up with a half grin breaking through uncertainly. "It's a quaint custom—in battle," he said. He looked suddenly serious. "Maybe you'd better sit over here."

Blaine said grudingly, "Well, she sure wouldn't fight for me, Cap'n. I reckon you made a Christian of her! She sure saved your life!"

THERE was a tough grin on his smashed and puffed lips. But his eyes were level and narrowed, and burned with challenging lights.

The girl gave a jerky laugh. She said with wiry frontier humor, "One of you killed the wrong man!"

Blaine's eyes sharpened to molten points. Then he looked around at the troopers bandaging one another. And he looked at the girl. Her eyes were dark and soft upon Drew; and inexplicably she was no longer a girl, but a woman. He spat. Suddenly he laughed and gave his head a shake.

He said, "You got a lot of twisted notions, Cap'n! I wasn't trying to rustle your beeves. I was just . . . trying to get 'em there a little faster!"

Drew felt a small, soft hand steal uncertainly into his. He gave it a hard squeeze, and his face softened as he spoke to Blaine. He said, "You're about the best all-around top-hand I ever met, Blaine. Even if you don't like the cavalry!"

"Shucks!" Blaine growled self-consciously. He looked out at the horizon, but there wasn't much to look at out there. He looked back suddenly at Drew, and stuck out his hand. "I reckon you're about tops at Injun fighting, Cap'n," he said embarrassedly. "So we'll just each keep on bein' top-hands in our own line. The Blaine outfit will take your herd through."

McGillicudy cleared his throat meaningfully.

"Oh!" Blaine grinned. "I mean, Sergeant, through with the wagon-train. I can rustle a herd of cattle any day, but it's only once or twice in a lifetime that a tough hand comes up against one who's a heap sight tougher—especially when he's a sojer!"

McGillicudy's homely Irish face, battered as it was, split into a recognizable grin. He and Blaine locked arms and walked off to help mop up the straggling Utes.

Drew looked at the girl. "Now what's happened to you, Polly?" he wondered aloud.

Tears hung like crystals on her eyelids. "I—I guess it's just that I've grown up, Rand."

THE END

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(Continued from page 6)

fast quarter-horses. Let a man bring a fast quarter-horse to that part of the Montana cow country and he had no trouble at all matching a horse race. Sid was usually the one to match the race. He had a habit of laying back until the man got to bragging and laid the cash on the line to back his talk.

Luther Dulin had the same wiry build of a jockey. He was lean, hatchet faced, with a hidden light behind the cold gray of his eyes. There are some who claim Luther was the shrewdest gambler of the three brothers. Luther was marked by a peculiar habit, a sort of nervous, meaningless laugh that sounded like a brittle cackle.

The laugh came forth when there was no need for it. In some poker game where the stakes were high. A big jackpot in the middle of the green-cloth poker table. Luke would throw one or two or three cards into the discard in draw poker. When he picked up the cards to fill his hand, his eyes would pucker and the cackling laugh would come out. I've seen seasoned gamblers give a sudden start. If they were strangers, sitting for the first time in a game where Luther had a chair, they would give him a look and figure he was drunk or damn fool crazy. Gamblers who knew Luther and had played poker with him a lot of times could never figure out that odd laugh. It started with startling abruptness, then chopped off on a high note. Luther could have filled his hand, or he could have missed. When it came to Luther's turn to bet, when he shoved in a stack of yellows, nobody on earth, even his own brothers, ever knew if he held the cards or was bluffing.

And far, far into the night, when dawn was graying the outside streets, that laugh of Luther Dulin's had frayed the other gambler's nerves. More than one good gambler often remarked that he could have cheerfully cut Luther's throat before the game broke up.

That laugh was Luther's stock in the gambling trade. It was his hole card and no man could read it. He told me one time that he practiced the laugh until he had it perfected. He timed it accurately, to the split second, when a player was undecided whether to lay down his hand or call.

So far as I know Luther is still alive. But he'll disappoint me if he does not laugh that brittle, meaningless laugh when it comes his time to cash in. The laugh will come from the thin-lipped poker face, without a shadow of fear in his gambler's eyes.

Heavy Dulin was inclined to paunchiness. Heavy set. Moon faced. There was a good-natured, guileless look about him. And you took him for just another good-natured fat man. Until you looked into his eyes.

Sometimes he worked in the mines in the Little Rockies, swinging a muck stick or a singlejack. Or he would go to work out on the ranch, digging post holes, or if it was haying season, he'd handle a pitchfork. There were always calluses on his hands. And that paunchy look was deceptive as hell. It was heavy muscle and hard tallow across his paunch. Heavy was a hard man to whip. And despite the calluses, his fingers were nimble.

Where he was unknown, they always took Heavy Dulin for a rube. And that was how he played it.

"There was a little larceny in the boys last night," Heavy would tell it later. "There's a law agin it that gives a man a few years in the pen. I let 'em off easy, when I had to loan 'em their breakfast money."

The headquarters for the Dulin boys was in the Little Rockies, where they were well known. Or well liked or well hated as the case might be. But nobody ever called them tinhorns, or said their

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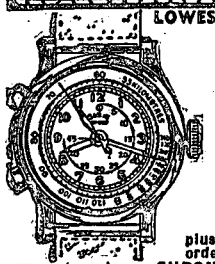

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gambling was crooked. Because it wasn't. They didn't have to cold-deck a man or slip a card off the bottom. The law of averages is with the dealer banking the game. Naturally they got into fights. Every man in the Little Rockies got into those fights. Sometimes they were gang fights that wrecked a saloon.

"Let's take it over to Dutch John's acrost the street," Sid would grin. "No use in us wreckin' my joint when we kin wreck his."

Those fights were rough, wild, half serious and half just rowdy fun. The only men that didn't wade in were drunk sheepherders or men grown too old and stove up to take a hand in it. Those Little Rockies ruckuses were wide open. The chips were free, and the drinks were on the losers.

NOW and then the Dulin boys would get wind of a big game. In Butte, Montana, then the richest hill on earth, or in Reno, or Denver, or Juarez, across the bridge from El Paco, or Tia Juana, below San Diego. They never said anything about it or told when or where they were going. Each of the brothers would pull out from town or the ranch, alone. Each with a gambler's bankroll in his pocket. When they reached their destination, each would drift into town alone. If there were three hotels, they stayed at separate hotels. They never spoke to each other. They remained strangers. Nobody would ever take them for brothers.

Each man had his own name. It could be any name, but never Dulin. When they sat at the same gambling table they sat in as strangers.

When they'd cleaned up, they moved out. Perhaps it was Sid who had the winnings. Or Luther. Or Heavy. But you could give a man big odds that one of the

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Dulin boys had money in his pocket. And it was more than just chicken feed.

When times were dull and lay heavy on their hands, they often quarreled among themselves. And those quarrels were bitter as raw quinine. They might go for weeks or months without speaking.

But when they got wind of a big game, they pooled their bets and headed yonderly. Then they would drift back to the Little Rockies and split the proceeds. Then pick up the feud where they left off.

For the most part, outsiders never knew the cause of their bitter quarrels. They kept it to themselves and within the family triangle.

If the Dulin boys didn't like you, they could be hard haters. But if a man was their friend, he could go to any one of the Dulin boys and ask a favor, and get it. If it was money, if they didn't have that much, they'd raise it for you. To offer them a written receipt was an insult. Sid, Luther and Heavy Dulin were gamblers whose word was as good as a banker's bond.

They never cheated at cards unless they caught the other man cheating. Then they beat him at his own game.

The Dulin boys were gambling men. Sid's wide grin. Luther's brittle laugh. The calluses on Heavy's hands. You'd never know they were blood brothers, unless you stood them alongside one another. Then you got a look at their eyes. I don't remember now if the eyes of the three Dulin boys were the same color. But there was that same look in the eyes of Sid, Luther and Heavy that marked them. Marked them for the Dulin Boys, Gamblers.

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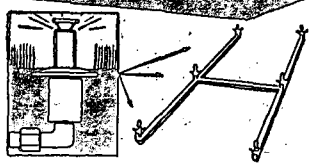

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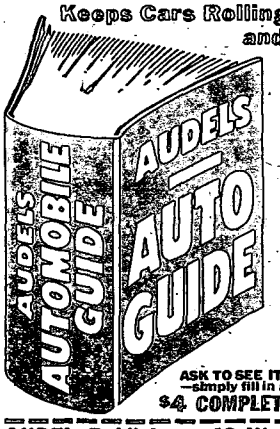

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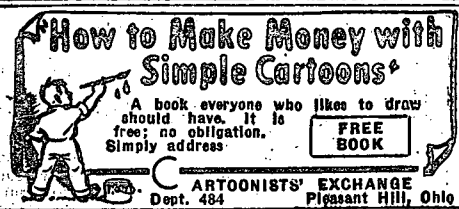

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(Continued from page 49)

wire spat. "But that would be too easy on you. Ten years in the pen will be more to the point. An' five hundred dollars for yore capture won't be hard to take, either."

"Who's goin' to give you five hundred berries for capturing me?" Bud asked cynically. "I haven't done anything."

Steep could not remain silent. "Haw, haw," he bellowed. "The county has put five hundred on the head of every rustler that's brought in. An' yo're shore ketched red-handed, feller. Don't try to tell us that them cattle jest wandered here on their own hook."

Bud felt that cold chill reach his heart. If there was money involved, then Muddy Wickwire was doubly dangerous. He strained his ears. The rustlers among the trees remained silent, evidently waiting to learn which way the cat jumped, for they certainly must have heard what had been said.

Did Wickwire and Steep know the prisoners were there? Bud had a sure hunch they did not. But his heart sank. Sooner or later they would find the bound men. And Bud knew Wickwire well enough to surmise what would be his fate. Those prisoners were worth fifteen hundred dollars, and Wickwire would be sure to covet that money for himself—even if he had to resort to murder.

Wickwire was chuckling triumphantly. "An' that brother of yores. He's in on this too, ain't he? We saw you start the dog with a message. Well, we'll just gather Mr. Sam Elliot in too, when he shows up. That'll run our dividend to a thousand dollars."

Bud's eyes shifted desperately. He had summoned his brother to a certain death trap. Anxiously he looked around for some means of escape.

"Watch him close, Ink," Wickwire hissed. "I'll take his gun. Then we'll

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hogtie him. We gotta be real careful."

The rancher approached warily. Bud, with his arms still above his head, made no move. But every fiber in his body was singing with tension. He was thinking of that wolf trap that lay in darkness at his feet, its jaws ready to spring.

Wickwire reached out to slip Bud's gun from the holster. He took a short step forward, planting his foot down.

Snap!

Steel teeth bit into Wickwire's boot in a flash. He staggered off balance.

Bud leaped aside instantly, his hand racing to his gun.

Ink Steep's six-shooter bellowed. The slug ripped a furrow along Bud's ribs. Then two guns flamed in unison as Steep's second shot mingled with the slam of Bud's .45.

But Steep was whirled around by the smash of Bud's bullet in his shoulder, and his second shot went wild. The range boss stumbled and fell with a groan.

Wickwire gave a despairing leap to tackle Bud, but the younger man whirled, his gun barrel describing an arc.

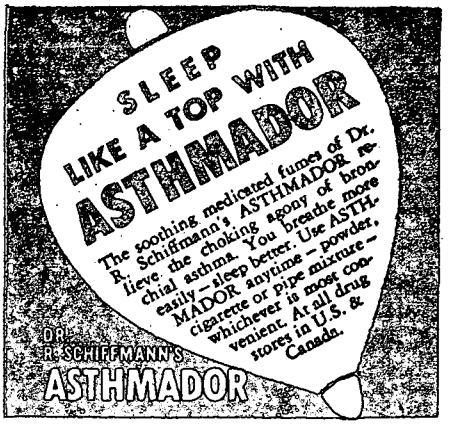
It caught the treacherous rancher on the temple, and Muddy Wickwire sank limply to the ground.

NOT long after sun-up two riders, led by a dusty, footsore hound who was staggering from exhaustion, came riding into the camp.

Bud arose with a surprised grin as he identified the rugged man who accompanied his brother.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Bud greeted the older man. "How did you get here so rapidly?"

"Happened to be stoppin' overnight at yore ranch when the pooch come scratchin' at the door carryin' the note in his collar," the county sheriff explained, as his eyes wandered in amazement over the scene. "Say, I thought yore note said



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you had only *three* rustlers! An—great hoopsnakes—is that Muddy Wickwire an' Ink Steep?"

Bud grinned. Wickwire, wearing a bandaged head and a snarl, sat nearby, his ankles tied. Steep lay on a blanket, nursing his wound.

Bud produced a slip of paper. "Wickwire wrote this for me last night when he got himself stuck in a wolf trap an' couldn't pry himself loose. It's a check for eight hundred dollars that was due me for a lot of wolves and cougars I trapped on his range this winter. When I first presented the bill, he wouldn't pay it. But he changed his mind last evenin'."

The sheriff knew Muddy Wickwire and easily surmised what had happened.

"You better hit for town an' cash that check, son," he said gravely. "Muddy might regret his generosity an' stop payment. I'll bring in yore prisoners—an' take care of the wounded."

Bud soon rode away, carrying the check. Then the sheriff turned to Wickwire. "Say, Muddy, are those yore cattle that was rustled?"

Muddy swore. "What do them brands look like?" he asked bitterly. "O' course they're my critters."

"I jest wanted to get yore confirmation," the sheriff said lightly. "Because, you see, only yesterday the commissioners decided the county was too poor to pay rewards for rustlers. So they added an amendment that the legal owners of any cattle found in the possession of cow thieves would be liable for the reward offered. It'll be added to yore tax bill next fall, Muddy, if you don't pay it."

Muddy Wickwire sank back, feeling very ill. Twenty-three hundred dollars. That's what this affair with those Elliot boys had cost him—not to mention a swarm of bruises and other injuries that racked his lean frame.

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ON ONE BLACK NIGHT

(Continued from page 71)

He gave Jim a hard shove toward the door and leaped toward the other room and the back door, quick and silent as a cat. Even if he hadn't recognized the voice, he could have guessed what horsemen would be out there, in the middle of the night. It was a United States marshal with a couple of penitentiary agents and a posse. That Indian who had passed Buck Earp had seen him and had gone and told.

Well, Big Jim Randle was the kind of man who read his Bible, prayed and told the truth. But this once he tried his best to lie and make it stick. He stepped out his door and done the best he could to cover the trail of a man who, just an hour before, had tried to murder him.

But Big Jim was soaking wet and shaking with cold like he had the ague. His face was bloody and everything about him showed that something had happened. And that old marshal was shrewd. He could guess what had happened.

He didn't cause any fuss. He congratulated Jim over the baby and sent him back into the fire. And then he took his gang off. Big Jim breathed easy. He knew the marshal knew he was lying like a son of a gun, but Buck Earp had already slipped away unseen. In those thick, black woods Jim figured Buck now was just as good as long gone.

* * *

That's the story big Sunny Randle told us, out there in that lonely, West Texas wildcat derrick. When he finished he looked at me a moment with a grave, half-embarrassed grin.

"I don't have to tell you I'm givin' you all this at second hand, do I?" he said. "I was there for part of it, yeah. But a little too young to remember much, myself. I was the baby."

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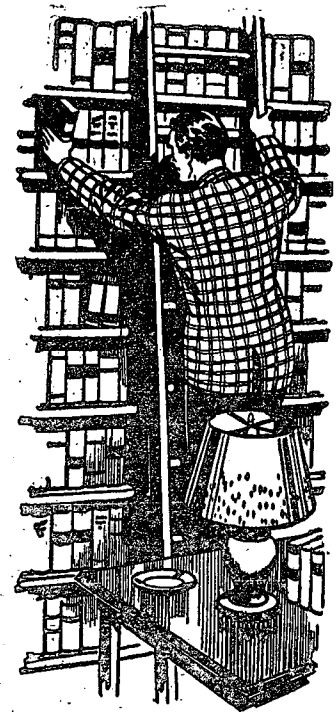

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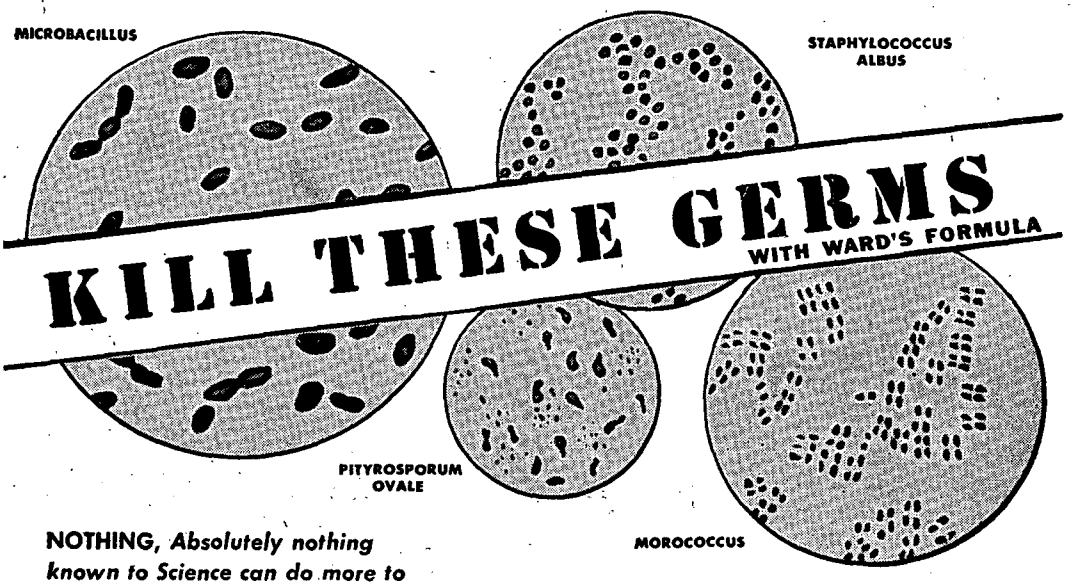

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